

Abram's Daughters 04 The Prodigal

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Beverly Lewis

The Prodigal (Abram's Daughters Series, #4) The Prodigal (Abram's Daughters Series, #4) The Prodigal ' :

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For

Carolene Robinson,

with happy memories

of our "baby days" . . .

and laugh'Out-loud Mark Twain nights.

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Abram's Daughters

The Covenant

The Betrayal The Sacrifice The Prodigal

The Heritage of Lancaster County

The Shunning The Confession The Reckoning

The Postcard

The Crossroad

The Redemption of Sarah Cain

October Song

Sanctuary*

The Sunroom

The Beverly Lewis Amish Heritage Cookbook

*with David Lewis

Beverly Lewis writes for younger readers, too! See back of book for details.8N'VHRLY LEWIS, born in the heart of Pennsylvania Dutch i
diiiiiry, fondly recalls her growing-up years. A keen interest in her mother's
Plain family heritage has led Beverly to set m;u\y of her popular stories in
Lancaster County.

A former schoolteacher and accomplished pianist, Beverly is a member of
the National League of American Pen Women (ihe Pikes Peak branch) and
the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. She is the 2003
recipient of the Distinguished Alumnus Award at Evangel University,
Springfield, Missouri, and her blockbuster novel, The Shunning, recently

won the Gold Book Award. Her bestselling novel *October Song* won the Silver Seal in the Benjamin Franklin Awards, and *The Postcard and Sanctuary* (a collaboration with Iiit husbandf David) received Silver Angel Awards, as did her ili-lightful picture book for all ages, *Annika's Secret Wish*. Beverly and her husband have three grown children and one grandchild and make their home in the Colorado foothills. 9'/#

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Winter 1956

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Oometimes in the midst of gray fog and drizzle, especially at ill is time of year, it's difficult to tell where the day ends and the night begins. Alas, mud clings to nearly everything buggy wheels, horses' hooves, and work boots. But in a few short days, when the predicted cold snap arrives in Gobbler's Knob, all this sludge will freeze hard, and hopefully everyone's footing will be safer once again.

Yet even now tlje long night of separation is past. My repentant sister, Sadie, has returned to the open arms of the People, and my heart is tender with love for her. Nine-yearold Lydiann privately asks me why Sadie ever left us to live in the Midwest. 'Tis a prickly subject with little hope of being understood by a girl so young and one who scarcely knows Sadie. I can only pray that dear Lydiann will set aside her curiosity and enjoy her eldest sister for who she is now... for who she is becoming.

Little by little, Sadie and I have completed the task of sewing her new dresses and aprons all black for the one-year mourning period since the few she brought home in her

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suitcase definitely reflected the style and pattern she wore while living in Nappanee, Indiana. Even the head coverings are quite different out west compared to here in Lancaster County lots more pleats to iron than we have in our prayer veilings. We boxed up all of Sadie's former clothing and sent it back to Nappanee, hoping some of her deceased husband's family might be able to put it to good use. For sure and for certain, she intends never to need it again.

Along with tending to my youngest sister and only brother, I have been going to plenty of quilting frolics, where joyous fellowship fills the day now that I've learned to tune out the tittle-tattle and simply concentrate on making tiny quilting stitches. With Adah Peachey Ebersol, my best friend and cousin by marriage and, at times, Aunt Lizzie by my side, I am ever so content. Aunt Lizzie has an amazing ability to swiftly sew many little stitches, and straight ones at that. Sometimes she and I make a game of seeing who can sew the smallest ones, and she always wins with seven or eight per needle. Naturally she would; she's been quilting for many years longer than I. Yet it seems to me finishing well in this life is not so much about who is the best or greatest at something, but rather who embraces lowliness of heart. Laying down one's rights meekness is a blessed virtue, one that must surely come straight from the Throne of Grace.

In the nearly seven years since Mamma's death, Aunt Lizzie has become a mother to me, though I have yet to refer to her as Mamma. Still, in my heart she is now just that, and I know she senses the affectionate tie that binds the two of us.

On quilting days, Aunt Lizzie and Sadie take turns staying home to cook and clean and look in on Dawdi John, our

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elderly maternal grandfather, who still lives in the cozy Dawdi I Inus adjoining our farmhouse. But neither Sadie nor Aunt Lizzie will ever consider letting me stay behind, and they're nither outspoken that I should be the one getting out of the house, even though winter is surely creeping up on us. I don't hiive to remind them that I do have ample opportunity to leave the Ebersol Cottage and have a change of scenery, since I work for the

English doctor, Henry Schwartz, and his wife, Lorraine. Truth be told, sometimes I think Lizzie is concerned I hat too much of my free time is spent with fancy folk, though she brings this up only rarely. Probably in the back of her mind and Dat's, too is Mary Ruth's leaving the community I of the People behind for the Mennonite church, though I helieve Dat has begun to temper his displeasure with Mary Ruth, speaking out less strongly here lately. Dawdi John, too, says he's seen "a whole other side" to Dat in recent days.

Secretly I've been reading Mamma's old Bible and searching out the underlined passages, coming to understand why dear Mamma was so patient and kind walking the way of Hue humility. Such qualities seemed to come second nature to her, as she had'a servant's heart, just as I desire to have before the Lord. If I continue to follow diligently the path (Sod has set before me, though sometimes as prickly as nettles when I find myself alone, I believe I will be most joyful.

Patience is yet another virtue, one that grows stronger through the practice of waiting, and I've done much of that in recent years, come to think of it. I often linger near the school yard for Lydiann and Abe, whom I happily view as my own little ones. Young Abe, surrounded as he is by a houseful of women folk, is dearly treasured by each of us. He brings such delight to our lives that it's truly painful to contemplate

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how terribly close we came to losing him along with Mamma on the day of his birth.

I must also admit to waiting, with some measure of hope, for a letter from Grasshopper Level, praying that one day Mamma's cousins Peter and Fannie Mast might wake up and realize they have a whole family of folk who love them here. And it would be wonderful-good, if the Lord wills, to

get word from someone anyone at all telling of Jonas Mast and his faraway life and family.

Most of all, I longingly wait for Sadie's six-month Proving to come to an agreeable end. Bishop Bontrager's choice of an older woman to oversee her during this time is Mamma's dearest friend, Miriam Peachey. The Proving means my sister can't be alone with a man for the time being, except male relatives. Of course this means she's not allowed to be courted until next April. Still, though she's but twenty-eight, I can't imagine her even being interested in another man or at least not for a good long time.

So there is nothing to do but go along with the minister's stern decree and look ahead to a happier season next springtime when Sadie will be reinstated as a member in good standing, if she keeps her nose clean. We can only hope and pray she will; otherwise, she will no longer be welcome in Dat's house or the community of the People. As harsh as her shunning was, what with no letters allowed all those years she was gone, I sincerely hope the severity of this second Proving has not caused further distress in my widowed sister.

Before long the shortest day will darken the hours at both ends of the clock, the celebration of the Lord's birthday will come and go ... and soon after, our little Abe will observe his seventh birthday. Then, too, my sister Hannah will bear her

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lliird wee babe. All of this in the space of a few short days, Lord willing.

For now I'm content to push split logs into Mamma's old wood stove and help Sadie and Aunt Lizzie cook and bake I lie family recipes, though in doing so, I am ever mindful of the constant ache in me, living life without dear Mamma. Keeping busy is one way of getting by, I daresay. Although Sadie now shares our parents' former room with me, it is in I he night hours, when the rest of the family is snug in their own beds, that I am most threatened by profound loneliness as a maidel. Nonetheless, I remember always to count my blessings, moment by moment. . . day by day.

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JH/arly morning winds pressed a row of saplings nearly flat to (he ground, and the stark contrast between a dreary sky and I lie eerie whiteness of a snow-sleek earth created a peculiar balance of light.

Leah pulled her woolen shawl tightly against her as she made her way back to the house from the barn, where she'd gone to take a tall Thermos of hot coffee to her father and brother-in-law, Gid.

" 'Tis terrible cbld out," she told Sadie, making a beeline into the kitchen, eager to warm her chapped hands over the wood stove.

Sadie looked up from Dat's favorite rocking chair, her needlework in her lap. " 'S'pose the men were glad for the coffee, jahV

Leah nodded. "I like seein' the smiles on their red faces. Besides, it's the least I can do for Dat and our new preacher, ya know." She smiled. Truth was, Dat needed a bit of fussing over, still floundering at times without Mamma. So did Gid, what with Hannah so great with child she could scarcely

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shuffle to the kitchen to cook a meal for their growing family. Both Lizzie and Sadie had been taking turns carrying hot dishes up to the log house on the edge of the woods, helping out some. "What do ya think Hannah will have this time girl or boy?" asked Leah.

"I'm sure Gid's hopin' for a son, just as Dat did all those years back. But it wouldn't surprise me if Hannah has another daughter. Girls seem to run in the Ebersol family," Sadie said.

"Jah, prob'ly so." Leah didn't care one way or the other. So far, young Abe was the only male offspring, and a right fine boy he was.

Hours later, when the time came to call the family together for dinner, Leah headed to the front room, where Lydiann was dusting the corner cupboard. Stopping to watch, Leah was struck by how sweet the girl's face was. Nearly heart shaped, truly, and pretty blue eyes much like Sadie's. She sighed, thinking what a handful Lydiann could be, yet at the same time, she brought a wealth of affection to the whole family. Lydiann was especially attentive to young Abe, her only close-in-age sibling.

"Sadie says the stew's ready," Leah said softly, so as not to startle her.

Turning, Lydiann smiled. She laid the dust rag on the floor and fell in step with Leah, slipping her arm around her waist. "Our big sister has that certain touch, ain't so?" Lydiann sniffed the air comically. "I daresay her cookin' oughta bring her another fine husband someday."

"Now, Lyddie," Leah chided her.

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"Well, Mamma," whispered Lydiann, "you know what I mean.."

"S'posin' I do, and Sadie does have that special something every cook yearns for." Leah went to the back door and rang the dinner bell while Lydiann washed her hands at the kitchen sink. Quickly Leah pulled the door shut, keenly aware of the bone-chilling cold, the bitter kind that crept up through long skirts and long Johns both.

The present cold snap was expected to linger for a while, according to the weather forecast, which wasn't always so reliable. Dat, however, took both the weatherman and The Farmer's Almanac quite seriously most days, especially here lately. Leah wondered if her father simply needed

something to hang his hat on, but the weather was the last thing a body could count on, as unpredictable as winter was long.

She went to help Sadie carry the food to the table. Along with stew, there were cornmeal muffins, a Waldorf salad, and il tray of carrot sticks, pickles, and olives, with plenty of hot coffee for the adults and fresh cow's milk for Lydiann and Abe. The children much preferred the taste of the milk when (he cows were barn fed instead of pasture fed, so she knew ihey'd be draining their glasses tonight.

By the time Dat and young Abe dashed indoors, got themselves washed up, and sat down at the table, Dawdi John and Aunt Lizzie had come over from the Dawdi Haus, commenting on the delicious aroma of Sadie's stew. Lydiann was swinging her legs beneath the long table, clearly restless as Leah slipped in next to her on the wooden bench.

"What's takin' everyone so long?" Lydiann whispered to

ier.

"You must be awful hungry," Leah replied. "But how 'bout

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let's be willin' to wait, jah?" She bowed her head as Dat motioned for the traditional silent prayer.

After the table blessing, Leah noticed Dat's gaze lingering a bit longer than usual on Aunt Lizzie, who was smiling right back at him. Well, now, what on earth . . . Is it possible? For a moment she contemplated the idea Dat might be taking a shine to Mamma's younger sister. She couldn't help wondering how peculiar she'd feel if Dat were actually sweet on her own birth mother.

And what might precious Mamma think?

Sadie dished up generous portions of the stew as each person in turn held a bowl to be filled. Abe's eyes were bright, apparently pleased at the prospect of his favorite "plenty of meat and potatoes." He smacked his lips and dug a spoon deep into his bowl.

"I'll be takin' Abe with me to the farm sale come Thursday," Dat said, glancing at Leah. "Just so ya know."

"Yippee, no school for me!" Abe exclaimed, his mouth a bit too full.

"Aw, Mamma . . ." Lydiann complained, looking at Leah with the most pitiful eyes. "Can't I "

"No need askin'." Lovingly, she leaned against Lydiann.

"But you always went with Dat to farm auctions growin' up, Mamma," Abe said, surprising her. "Ain't so, Dat? You told me as much."

Their father had to struggle to keep a grin in check, his whiskers wriggling slightly on both sides of his mouth. Truth was, Abe was quite right, and Leah was somewhat taken aback that Dat had told about those days when she had been her father's substitute son.

"Jah, Leah was quite a tomboy for a gut mahy years*" Here

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I 'lit turned and, for a moment, looked fondly at her. Feeling

I1 it* warmth in her cheeks, she lowered her head. It had been i he longest time since Dat had said such a thing in private, li'l ulone in front of everyone.

"I daresay our Leah has herself a higher callin' now," Aunt I izzie spoke up.

"She's our sister and our mamma," Abe said, grinning from

cur to ear.

Lydiann muttered something, though just what, Leah

;ired not to guess. Best not to make an issue of it. No, let

I ydiann simmer over having to attend school on the day of

I1 le farm sale. She needed not to miss any more school, havuif* recently suffered a long bout with the flu. Even if Lydiann hadn't missed at all this year, there was no reason for her to I m> traipsing off to the all-day farm sale with Dat, Abe, and i iiJ when her place was at school or home.

Mamma must've thought that of me, too . . . all those years

"You go 'n' have yourself a fine day of book learnin' on Thursday, Lydiann," Dat said just then. "And no lip 'bout it, ya hear?" *

Dat must have sensed the rising will in his youngest daughter. He was becoming more in tune with his family's needs as each year passed, in spite of the grief he carried over him like a shroud.

Lydiann buttered her cornmeal muffin and then asked meekly for some apricot jam. Sadie hopped right up from the iable to get it, and Dawdi John smiled broadly at the preserves coming and asked for a second helping of both stew and muflias. "Won't be a crumb of leftovers." He patted his slightholly. ; , -.: ,:,, - . ; ' ...,,- .-:, ,;- . ;,,, -./;

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This got Abe laughing and leaning forward to look down the table at their grandfather. "Maybe Dawdi oughta be goin' with us to the sale," Abe said. "What do ya think of that, Dawdi John?"

Dat murmured his concern. It was anybody's guess whether or not Dawdi, at his feeble age, could keep up with the menfolk, since a full year had passed since Dawdi had made any attempt at going. In fact, Leah recalled clearly the last time Lizzie's elderly father had decided to push himself too hard and go down to Ninepoints, where an Amish farmer was selling everything from hayforks to harnesses to the farmhouse itself. Dat had soundly reprimanded Aunt Lizzie for suggesting that her frail father go. Leah knew this because she'd unintentionally overheard them talking in the barn that day. Turned out poor Dawdi had gotten right dizzy at the sale, sick to his stomach, and later that night, he'd suffered with a high fever and the shakes. The illness had put an awful fear in not only Dat, but all of them.

Thankfully Dawdi was now saying no to young Abe's request, his white beard brushing against the blue of his shirt as he shook his head. "Acfi, you and Abram go for the day. Leave me here at home with the women folk."

Once again Leah felt a warm and welcome relief, and she realized anew how deep in her heart she carried each one of her family members.

Sadie and Dat hitched up the open sleigh to the horse the next morning, which took far less time than the usual half hour or so when the job was to be accomplished by only one

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prison. With weather this nippy, Sadie couldn't see letting I rnli sliiit out with frozen fingers and toes from having to UU'li up and then drive Lydiann and Abe to school, stopping Iiir nil I he neighborhood children who attended Amish and hi^'lish alike. It had been her idea to surprise Leah, getting

I 'ill from the barn so the two of them could prepare the .IHkIi.

Since returning home in October, she hadn't found the (oumge to open her mouth and tell the whole truth to her .11 si cr, but she was awful sorry about the part she'd played in keeping Jonas from marrying Leah. The letter from Leah to Ikt beloved, the one Sadie had deliberately and angrily dis(.uxlcd so long ago, continued to haunt her. But she worried

I1 iiii it might cause another rift between herself and her dear fisler if she were to confess the wicked deed. Meanwhile, she simply tried to find ways to help lift the domestic burden for li'iih anything to lessen her sense of guilt.

Leah's face shone with delight when she came out of the house, her pleasure evident at not having to face the chore si ilgle-handedly. She rushed to Sadie and hugged her but good while Dat gririned and waved and headed back to the barn. "Ach, Sadie . . . and Dat, you didn't have to do this."

Sadie rubbed her hands together. "We wanted to."

Just then Lydiann and Abe came flying out the back door, lunch buckets in hand. "One more day of school till the farm stile," Abe hollered over his shoulder, beating Lydiann to the sleigh.

Sadie saw Lydiann pull a face. Then both children huighed and hopped up into the sleigh. Turning to face her, I hey waved as Leah twitched the reins, pulling out and heading down the long lane to the road.

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Sadie, aware of the bitter cold, stood there longer than need be, watching the horse's head rise and fall as the sleigh, soon to be filled with schoolchildren, slipped away from view.

I might' ve had a sleigh full of my own little ones.

Slowly she made her way toward the house, up the sidewalk shoveled clean of new snow. Tis nearly Christmas and I ought to be happy.

"Oughta be a lot of things," she muttered as she reached for the back door and hurried inside. She didn't move quickly to the wood stove to warm her ice-cold hands and feet. She went and stood at the window, looking out over the side pasture, her gaze drifting all the way to the edge of the woods. Deep in that forest, there were deer hunters probably right now resting and

warming themselves in an old, run-down shanty. She wished to goodness the place had fallen down in disrepair, wished Aunt Lizzie might have discovered the flattened shelter on one of her many treks through the woods, its walls of decaying wood lying flat on the snow-glazed ground, just asking to be hauled away.

Sadie, recognized anew the one reason she'd ever hesitated to write to Bishop Bontrager telling of her widowhood and of her desire to return home to her father's house: the sordid memories here of the sin she had allowed herself to get caught up in as a teenager, the wickedness she'd shared with the village doctor's younger son. Although she had safely passed the Ohio church Proving and eventually married an upstanding young man, Harvey Hochstetler, there were times when thoughts of Derek Schwartz still haunted her. Did he even know she'd given birth to a stillborn son?

Derry. . . the boy who'd stolen her virtue. No, that was not true and she knew it. She had willingly given up her

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innocence to a virtual stranger, a heathen, as Dat often said "I lingshers. She had known firsthand that Deny was just

11 al, but he had not been a thief those nights in the hunters' .hack.

Now, though, having heard that Mary Ruth was seeing

I Vrry's older brother, Robert, Sadie couldn't help but feel .i|iK'iimish at the wretched possibility of having to meet him i nw iliiy. This made her tremble, and she hoped such a meet'

111)4 might be months, even years away. She just felt so helpless .ii limes, missing Harvey something awful, even more so now i hill she was safely home again, snug in Dat's big farmhouse. Yet the knowledge of that horrid shanty, the place where she h;ul conceived her first child, illegitimate at that, caused her id draw her black shawl around her chin as she looked out

It toward the dark woods.

// the bishop knew my thoughts, he'd surely be displeased. She knew she ought not to dwell on the past. She ought to think back on the good years she'd spent with Harvey, the kind and loving husband the Lord God heavenly Father had granted her for a time. Still, coming home had stirred everything up again. Sometimes she wondered if the almighty One had withheld His favor even though she had turned from her rebellious ways, with the help of the Ohio ministers to begin (with . . . and thoughtful Jonas. She had completed her proving time in Millersburg well before ever meeting Harvey and (moving to Nappanee.

All the babies I carried, she thought. All of them lost to me . . . to Harvey, too. All the blue-faced wee ones I birthed . . .

Silently she questioned if the reckless willfulness of her early sin had made divine judgment most severe. Here she was, all this time after, stuck in a mire of doubt and hopelessness, a

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woman longing for her dead children and husband. The awareness that Bishop Bontrager had set her up as an example to the young people did not make things any easier.

She had long wished for Dad to have known Harvey, for her sisters to have enjoyed her husband's hearty laugh and interesting stories told around the hearth. And yet in spite of the congenial and closely knit family she had shared with Harvey, she had often felt she was marking time clear out there in Indiana, far away from home. There had always been a feeling of waiting to undo what had been already done. She had sometimes cried herself to sleep, longing for Mamma's loving arms and nighttime talks with Leah. All of this unbeknownst to her husband.

I'm home now. Regardless of her initial reservations, she was glad to be living in a big family once again, with Dat and Leah, Aunt Lizzie and Dawdi John, and the eager-faced Lydiann and Abe finally getting to know her youngest siblings. Most of all, it was fun watching her young sister and brother growing up underfoot, seeing their wide-eyed devotion to Leah. She wouldn't let herself envy Leah for having what she did not a close bond with children, the memory of having held Lydiann and Abe ever so near as infants, rocking them to sleep in their tiny cotton gowns, rejoicing over their first toddler steps. Constantly, though, Sadie noticed every young one who was the age her children would have been had they lived . . . especially her dead son.

Still, it did seem a bit unfair that Leah was a mother without having given birth, while Sadie had given birth but was not a mother. Yet she wouldn't allow herself to contemplate that too much, not wishing to usurp Leah's position in Lydiann's and Abe's eyes. ,,,,,,,

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Moving away from the window, she trudged to the utility mom just off the kitchen. There, she removed her shawl and lninjL(il on the third wooden peg. The first peg belonged to I >iif, of course, and she had noticed right away upon her i'!urn home last fall that Leah's shawl now hung where N lamina's always had. So, even though there was still a vacant

1'l.ice at the table for Mamma, Leah must have felt no need

111 leave the wooden peg empty.

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When the nine o'clock auctioneer's chant began, Abram was ready. He and Abe had taken plenty of time to scrutinize all the farm equipment, as well as the field mules up for sale. Abe followed him around, never leaving his side, and Abram was downright pleased.

Dozens of men milled about in the snow and mud, most of them wearing black felt hats, the telltale sign of an Amishman. They stood around chewing the fat and telling jokes, some of them spitting tobacco. Each potential customer eyed the enormous array of farm tools, woodworking implements, livestock, milking equipment, and odds and ends of things old green medicine bottles, two martin birdhouses, woolen mufflers, work boots and gloves, and a pile of garden rakes all the men hoping for a bargain price. Their sons and grand' sons were off playing cornerball or sitting over on the splitrail fence like black-capped chickadees perched on a wire.

When the time came, Abram raised his head slowly, signaling his first bid on a good-sized box of saws, drills, and sandpaper. The auctioneer scanned the crowd shrewdly,

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He quickly spied another interested farmer. Up another dollar. Mirntn Nickered his eyebrow at the local auctioneer, older limn hi urn' but known for keeping the crowd loose.

"Who's biddin' against us, Dat?" whispered Abe, jumping up mid down, trying to see over the crowd.

Alinim put a hand on the lad's shoulder, not wanting to ml1- liis chance at the saws and drills. A few more blinks of the rye and the bidding was done. The other fellow hadn't WwiH'd them as much as Abram had. "Come on, now," he will in Abe. "We got ourselves some right nice handsaws."

I k- guided his boy through the crowd to claim the goods, miylng it was Old Jonathan Lapp who'd dropped out of the bidding when he saw how quickly Abram kept coming back with w higher bid.

"When can I start makin' such bids?" Abe asked as they unraveled the box of saws and things to the carriage.

"When you're earnin' money." Abram had to smile at Al's innocent sincerity.

"Just when will that be?"

"In due time" was all he said. There was plenty of food to feed the mound, but when it came to cash there was less to speak of. In these days, what with Sadie living at home now. Leah, on the other hand, put every dime she made from her work at the Schwartz clinic into the family pot. Even so, Abram couldn't afford to pay his young son for his field and barn work before and after school and on weekends. He wouldn't think of doing so until Abe was closer to courting age, a good while away.

Leah and his boy spent several more hours at the farm sale. In the lowing Abram's only purchase. They stood in the barnyard talking with the men, but when Abe's nose and ears began to

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look mighty red, almost purple, he knew he best be taking this one home to warm up.

It was during the buggy ride home that Abram got to thinking more about the fact that the gardening work should no longer fall on Leah's and Lydiann's shoulders as it had ever since Hannah had married Gid and moved to Lizzie's former house in the woods. Sadie and Aunt Lizzie would have to take up the slack next spring, because Leah had her hands plenty full, doing a right fine job caring for the youngsters. He wouldn't think of asking her to quit her housecleaning job at the doctor's place. Besides her earnings being such a help, Leah needed a chance to get away from the confines of their four walls. He'd heard from the doctor that his missus felt she couldn't manage without Leah, so not only had she impressed them with her hard work, Leah had endeared herself to them, as well.

Thoughts of the Schwartzes led his mind to Mary Ruth, who was rather taken with their firstborn, presently studying to be a preacher. Having not met "honorable" Robert as of yet, he had only Mary Ruth's word to go on. Someday, if they continued to spend time together, he'd have to do the mannerly thing and meet his daughter's Mennonite boyfriend.

Lest his thoughts run away with him, he asked Abe, sitting to his left, what he thought of exchanging names in the family this Christmas. He didn't go so far as to say this approach would save some of the family's money, though.

"I'd like to draw Mamma Leah's name, if we put the names in a hat." Abe's blue eyes shone as he turned to look

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in Abniin. "Either Mamma's or Lydiann's."

' "Noi C lid's, then?" He was taken aback by the serious tone

|nl ,\ln*'s re-mark.

I AIh- shook his head. "Gid oughta be gotten by Hannah or

hi!It' ol llu-ir girls. Ain't so?"

I Clicking his tongue, Abram urged the horse onward

||owurcl home. Ida's boy was as discerning and devoted as he

Vf/m youthful. Abram reached down and patted Abe on the

Iklire hi id nodded, mighty glad to have such fine company this

Ibfltk winter day. ,

I The Ohio sun burned bright in Jonas Mast's face, momenllHrllly blinding him, and he moved slightly, trying to avoid its BfiPlietrating rays, wanting to see clearly the auctioneer's face Ithc old codger's eyes. After all, it was

the eye contact that he Iwiuilod, having upped his bid this high already. I Hark blue and fluted, the carnival glass vase was the lohji'i'i of his steady bidding, and he would not let up, for he Iknt'w he had stumbled upon the best choice of a present for Idt'iir Emma. He could just imagine the look of sheer joy on Ihri' face when he gave it to her on Christmas Day. I He'd come to the distant farm sale interested in purchasliriK additional woodworking tools, having heard tell of the pUietion through the Amish grapevine. But while wandering lubout, he'd discovered antique dishes, quilts, and other old household items laid out in the front room of the house, set llisi up from the barn on a slope.

I // I can just get the final bid, he thought, raising his eyeIhn >ws again to signal the auctioneer he had not lost interest.

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The pretty vase was being held high in the air just now, and his pulse sped up when he heard the word "Sold!"

But the auctioneer shielded his eyes from the sun and, with a mystified look, peered into the crowd. "I daresay you ain't from round here."

"Name's Jonas Mast," he replied quickly, slightly embarrassed, with the crowd having turned to stare his way. "From up north a ways."

"Well, fine and dandy. Sold to our gut neighbor Jonas."

He had claimed his prize and turned to head back toward his horse and carriage when an old Mennonite farmer came up to him, leaning on his wooden cane. "Couldn't help overhearin', but you're Jonas Mast, ya say?"

Jonas offered a tentative nod.

"Well, if that don't beat all. World's gettin' smaller all the time, 'specially among us Plain folk . . . but with so many Masts and Jonases running round, who's to say if it was you, really."

"I'm sorry. . . have we met somewhere?"

"Doubt it," the older man replied, squinting his bleary eyes. "But then again, who knows? Ever live in Millersburg?"

Jonas felt surprise. "Why do ya ask?"

Such a long time ago . . .

With renewed excitement, the old farmer continued. "My cousin and I were reddin' out an old shed yesterday and happened to stumble onto a tattered old letter unopened, as I recall with a faded name written prettily on it."

Jonas was downright curious, though unsure if the whitehaired man even knew what he was talking about. "Whom was the letter addressed to?" , , .. '....',. ;!:-::

"Ac/i, to you, of course." : ..;, ' ' ,::>.:; ;

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P "Hmm ... you don't say." He was altogether befuddled. Was there a return address?"

The old fellow removed his hat and scratched his head. I lonestly, paid no mind to that."

Jonas found all the talk of a letter puzzling certainly the malt's guess that he had once lived in Millersburg was right, I ,u(the rest of the story was downright odd. He stepped closer | in the elderly man, noticing a hint of moonshine on his I breath. "S'pose I best be headin' on home now," said Jonas, , (inging to the antique vase. "Have a gut day!" ;

Having waited near the edge of the school yard in the < old, Lydiann decided she couldn't stand there another min' iHe waiting for Mamma Leah to come fetch her, so she ran ,md caught up with a group of four other Amish girls walking .Jong the country road. Up ahead, a hard stone's throw away, ix. boys her age, all from the one-room Georgetown School, walked in the middle of the road, and she watched with inter' f.st as tJhey waited tilfcthe last minute to step to the side, as if daring a horse and buggy to run them over. Even her little brother" Abe, liked to take part in such boyish stunts, except loday hte was off with Dat at a farm sale.

She? listened as the girls jabbered in Pennsylvania Dutch, not joining in their conversation about the Christmas play, where ^he was to be Mary, the mother of baby Jesus, come I his Monday, Christmas Eve afternoon.

Th& boys shifted to the right side of the road as a car came loward them, and she noticed the dark-haired Mennonite boy, Cairl Nolt, scramble to safety more quickly than either of

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the three Amish and two English boys. The only child of Dan and Dottie Nolt whistled as He scurried along. The Nolts owned the house where Lydiann's older sister Mary Ruth, a schoolteacher at an all-EnglisH school, lived and worked part' time.

"Carl's gonna make enfeiner Joseph, ain't?" one of the girls said, all smiles.

This brought a round of snickers and "shhs!" but Lydiann pretended not to hear just what a fine Joseph he would be. Carl has the brovjnest eyes I've ever seen, she thought, wondering right then which of his natural parents had passed down the dark eyes to him and why on earth they hadn't kept him.

It was Mary Ruth, who was more like a big sister to Carl than she'd ever been to Lydiann, who'd confided that Carl had been adopted promptly after his birth. Since Mary Ruth was known for sometimes saying too much, Lydiann had never spoken of the matter with Carl. Still, she was pretty sure he had a good heart at least she thought so from having rehearsed the nativity play during lunchtime recess yesterday and today. But pretending to be Mary to a Joseph who was no more Amish than the man in the moon sent a strange chill up her spine. She would never let on as much, though, for the sake of Mary Ruth, who had been bringing Carl with her when she came to the Ebersol Cottage to visit each week. It seemed Mary Ruth was a little too eager to include Carl in the games played near the wood stove with both Lydiann and Abe. Right peculiar it was, especially since Dat had made it clear he did not approve of Mary Ruth living with folk who had "electric." Such a blight it was, losing one of their own to Mennonites. .

Lydiann suspected kindhearted Aunt Lizzie of having

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(iiefhinjj; to do with Dat welcoming Mary Ruth, as well as

1 111. Aunt Lizzie had a way of poking her nose in and having

11' i say, and Dat didn't seem to mind this much at all. Ever so "iinzing, really.

Up ahead, riding in a one-horse sleigh, came Mamma

I .ill. Lydiann quickened her pace, glad to see her. "Come!

, i live yourself a ride home!" she called to the other children.

: The girls responded by hurrying to catch up with her,

I' r.sing the boys, who lagged behind all but Carl. "Mind if I

' iinc along?" he asked no one in particular.

"I lop on," Mamma said, her cheeks bright pink.

Carl hesitated, looking back toward the boys.

"It's all right," Lydiann said, hoping he might sit right beside her, though she suspected he would keep his distance.

Carl smiled and climbed aboard, sitting closer to Mamma Leah than to any of the girls.

"When are you comin' with Mary Ruth for a visit again, Carl?" Mamma asked, and Lydiann paid attention to what he intended to say.

He shrugged his shoulders and said nothing for a moment. Then, when he finally found his voice, he said, "Mary Ruth says we might have all of you over for New Year's Eve ... if I'm agreeable with your father."

"How kind of you, Carl," Mamma replied before Lydiann could speak up.

Carl looked more comfortable now, and Lydiann wondered if he had been bashful before getting on the sleigh because of the boys. Maybe he worried what they might think of him riding with a group of girls.

"Where's Abe today?" he asked. Lydiann nearly missed the question, so caught up she was in her thoughts. . . .

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Once again Mamma Leah beat her to a reply. "Oh, he's off to a farm sale with his father."

"Lookin' to buy anything particular?" asked Carl.

Probably some milkin' equipment and whatnot, thought Lydiann. But she didn't say what she was thinking and instead nodded her head and watched the relaxed way Carl sat crosslegged on the hay, wrapped in one of the woolen blankets Mamma Leah had brought along.

"Oh, I 'spect they might just find something worthwhile," Mamma said, looking back over her shoulder. "They usually do."

"I think my uncle went to that sale, too," Carl said. "He used to be Amish, so he likes to go where the Old Order farmers gather."

Lydiann found this interesting. So ... somewhere in Carl's adopted family there had been at least one Amishman. Did he have the church before baptism, or was he shunned like Sadie? Since Carl said no more, she wasn't about to follow up on the subject. Shunning was much too close to home, what with Sadie going through her Proving time now. Shunnings divided families, turning sisters and brothers into strangers . . . even if the shunned one repented and returned home.

Poor Sadie, pretty as the day was long. What on earth had she done to be treated so?

The smell of pecan pies baking drifted in from the doorway between the front room and the Dawdi Haus, and the familiar aroma reminded Sadie of Mamma, who had loved the Christmas season more than any other. Drawn by the delicious scent, Sadie headed next door to find Dawdi John napping in his rocking chair head back, mouth open, and sawing logs rather loudly.

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Whnv's Aunt Lizzie?

1 ipi<K-iiijj; through the small front room to investigate the Liiitttler ,'.i|jiare of a kitchen, she quickly realized Aunt Lizzie [-WW nowhere to be seen. She glanced at Dawdi, who remained -oblivious 10 her presence, and opened the door leading to the iliiiiiB, Instead of calling up to her and risking awakening I I Mwill, Sudie stepped lightly, heading upstairs.

She found her aunt sitting in the window of the first bedtin mil Lizzie's own, reading the Bible. "Oh, hullo there,

....He."

"Mind if I sit with you?"

Lizzie nodded. "Make yourself comfortable." | "Couldn't help but smell the pies."

Lizzie smiled. "Thought I'd surprise everyone and serve Vni lor supper."

"Ahe and Lydiann will like that, for sure and for certain." N,nlk> grew quiet.

Aunt Lizzie put her finger in the Bible, closing it, and tilted her head just so, looking hard at her now. "Something's I i H i your mind, child. I can nearly hear it from here."

She thought h&v much better it might be if she didn't give in to the urge to open herself up and instead simply sat there, basking in the love her aunt so effortlessly offered. But ! i/zie was altogether correct that there was much on her in11ul. "I miss talkin' to ya, Aendi. And I want to speak about my husband, Harvey, with somebody. . . with you, maybe, if v 11Vi like to hear."

"Well, sure I would," Lizzie insisted.

Sadie related that she wished her family might have had i he opportunity to know her husband. "Harvey kept folk in .inches, tellin' one story after 'nother whenever we invited

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relatives or friends over for meals or whatnot. Among other things, I sorely miss his laughter."

Aunt Lizzie leaned back, relaxing in her chair. "I daresay there is much to miss. I wish to goodness I might've known your Harvey."

Sadie felt suddenly eager to share something of her married years with Lizzie, having kept fairly mum since her return home, her loss having been too recent. She talked of their Christmases together, happily surrounded by Harvey's extended family, as well as the church folk. "Ach, we had the

kindest bishop. I often wished he might've met Bishop Bontrager somehow, ya know." She was ever so careful not to step too hard on their bishop's toes here, but there had been many times when she felt sorry for Dat and Mamma and other members of the Gobbler's Knob church district, as well as herself. But, lest she show disrespect now for the Lord's anointed, she kept her peace. Aunt Lizzie need not know her private opinion of Bishop Bontrager. Besides, Lizzie had never admitted to having a problem with him.

"I'm glad you had such a fine husband and church in Indiana," Aunt Lizzie said after a while, giving Sadie's knee a pat. "We best be checking on the pies."

Sadie followed her downstairs and helped her set the pies out to cool. They then looked in on Dawdi John, who was still sleeping, before Lizzie motioned Sadie back upstairs. "There's something I've been thinkin' on," her aunt said in hushed tones. "And it's best ya hear it from me."

Sadie wondered if this heart-to-heart talk might involve Leah and her maidel status, or some such sad thing. Can it beshe senses I've kept mum about some of my own meddling in that?

But Lizzie readily made it clear she had other things on

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her mind. "When I was but a teenager, I got myself in some terrible trouble, as you already know." She stopped, as if to catch her breath. "I never told you all there was to the

Nfory . . . and now I feel you oughta know the daughter I gave birth to is your sister Leah in all truth, your first cousin."

JAunr Lizzie's face was slightly flushed. "Leah has known this [nince her baptism, and before the Lord took your mamma, she

Inl;ired this with Mary Ruth and Hannah. I thought it was

[high time you knew, too."

j Aunt Lizzie is Leah's mother? Sadie felt the air go clean out lol her.

"Leah's your. . . your own daughter?" I Lizzie nodded her head, a tear glistening in her eye.

Struggling to take in this bewildering revelation, Sadie whispered at last, "How does Leah feel 'bout this?"

"Oh, we never speak of it anymore, just as the People do not speak of the shun once a person repents," said Lizzie.

Sadie found this news not only curious but altogether unnerving. Lizzie had given Leah to Mamma and Dat to raise, yet her child had grown up at arm's length, where Lizzie could observe and love her.

A sftiver of sadness flew up her back, and Sadie, for a fleeting moment, recalled with dread the days and nights she had frequently heard the cries of a phantom baby, a constant reminder of her first wee one.

"I don't know what to say, really," she confessed, choking down the lump in her throat at the thought of Leah's unexpected bond with the aunt Sadie so admired. "To think you and Leah . . . well, I guess I might've wondered all those years why Leah was the only dark-haired one in the family. But I never would've guessed this."

Aunt Lizzie went on to say that, at the time of Leah's

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conception, she had been so caught up in her youthful rebellion she hadn't cared what anybody thought. "I just did as I pleased."

Same as I did, Sadie thought ruefully.

"Thankfully, your parents took me in as their own for a time, even as they did Leah when she was born."

"So the young man, Leah's father, never wanted to marry you or care for you?" The question slipped out effortlessly, though as soon as Sadie had voiced it, she felt suddenly sorry. "Uh, that's not at all for me to ask."

"No . . . no, it's to be expected, really 'tis."

But when Lizzie did not offer to say more about Leah's blood father, Sadie knew better than to press the question now burning in her mind.

Just who is Leah's real father? ,'.- , ., .-[

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j\ Jid says might just be a gut idea if the hex doctor's on hand for rliis baby," Hannah told Aunt Lizzie in the privacy of her Cozy kitchen on Christmas Eve day. "He thinks we should've i'hiul him here for the first two, just to be safe."

She had been pouring tea for herself when who but Lizzie Inul come knocking at the back door. Having felt awful slug#h\ all day, Hannah was glad for a chance to sit down and hhnre a nice cup of tea with Lizzie. They'd gotten on to the lupic of Hannah's cjtoice of an Amish midwife when Hannah Ic ll she ought to speak up about her fears.

"Dat still feels strongly that Mamma would be alive today il he'd had his way about calliii' in the powwow doctor." She wiitched Aunt Lizzie closely, hoping for some further explanation as to why Lizzie, like Mamma, was so opposed to the hyiupathy healers.

Lizzie's hazel-brown eyes appeared more earnest now; it was surprising to see her usually cheery aunt turn suddenly solemn. She poured a rounded teaspoon of sugar into her teacup and stirred slowly before looking up at last. "I hesitate to

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talk much about so-and-so's stubborn stand on this subject, but if I do ... well, please don't say anything."

"You have my word, Aendi."

Lizzie took several sips of hot tea. Then, setting the pretty floral cup down lightly on its matching saucer, she continued. "This has been a sore point with your father and me for much too long, I must admit. Here lately, though, I think he may be coming round 'bout the things your mamma believed in. I pray so."

Hannah found this admission hard to understand. What was Lizzie saying? That she and Dat had started to see eye to eye on the Amish doctors? If so, what would it mean for her and Gid . . . and the baby soon to be born? Would Dat interfere, try to convince Gid otherwise?

She shuddered to think of risking her baby's life as Mamma had done, only to lose her own. It was a miracle young Abe was as sturdy and smart as he was. Any of the women folk, if they were privy to all that Leah said poor Mamma had gone through to birth Abe, might still be bracing themselves, waiting for something wrong to show up either mentally or physically in her little brother. For Dat's sake and Abe's, too, Hannah sincerely hoped Abe would be healthy his whole life long.

"Are ya sayin' Dat would be opposed to having a hex doctor assist the midwife?"

Aunt Lizzie raised her eyebrows. "Why in heaven's name would you want to do such a thing, Hannah? Your mamma never did. She wanted nothing to do with the powwow doctors."

Sometimes Hannah just wished to goodness she could simply share her opinion without Aunt Lizzie raising a stink,

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especiially when Ida Mae and Katie Ann were napping not so fill* from the kitchen. Knowing Lizzie as she did, Hannah wouldn't put it past her aunt to speak her mind and then some. Truth was, this minute she didn't feel strong enough to iif(j;uc her side of things and regretted bringing up the subject. Sure, Lizzie had her view, but so did Hannah. And now that she was Gid's wife, shouldn't she take into account his feelings? After all, the growing babe within her belonged to her iind Gid, not to Lizzie.

"I'd rather be safe than sorry, is all," she whispered, tears springing to her eyes.

Aunt Lizzie placed a soft hand on hers. "Well, now, Hannah, what's to worry? You had no trouble birthing Ida and Katie."

Hannah nodded. " 'Tis quite true."

"Why do ya feel the need to invite a spirit of evil into this house?"

Hannah gasped. What's Lizzie saying? Does she actually believe the Amish doctor is of the devil?

She'd heard such whispered things from one of Mamma's Mast cousins eitlfer Rebekah or Katie years ago when Dat and Mamma were still on friendly terms with Cousins Peter and Fannie, but never before from Aunt Lizzie.

"I don't think you understand," Hannah began quietly at first, but she felt the ire rise in her as she went on. "I want to have a safe delivery. . . and I

want to live to see this new one grow up same as Ida and Katie. Why should you want to stand in my way?"

"And why would ya put your trust in someone other than the Lord God? Powwowing is nothing short of white witchcraft. Your mamma said the same." Aunt Lizzie pursed her

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lips, then stared down at the cup of tea before her, fiddling with the handle.

Hannah shook her head in disagreement but said no more. Something within her wanted to say, We'll decide for ourselves. But there was another urging deep inside her, prompting her to think long and hard about this, even suggest that Gid discuss it with Dat himself.

"Death haunts me, Aunt Lizzie," she surprised herself in saying.

Lizzie reached over to pat her hand again. " 'Cause of your mamma?"

"Maybe so ... and Mary Ruth's first beau, Elias. One just never knows. .."

Lizzie fell silent as she stroked Hannah's hand.

Hannah felt the need to fill the stillness, though. "Seems nobody knows for sure and for certain what's waitin' for us on the other side."

Lizzie frowned. "Over Jordan?"

Hannah nodded. "I wish this wasn't so troubling." She continued on, sharing that she'd struggled privately since childhood with the issue of death. "Some

days I wish we could simply live forever, the way Adam and Eve were created to."

"Without aging?" Here Aunt Lizzie broke into a winning smile. "Just think, Dawdi John's beard might be dragging on the ground if that's the way the dear Lord intended things to be for us now. . . since Adam fell from grace."

"Guess it was fallin' from grace that turned ev'rything topsy-turvy, ain't? If only Adam and Eve had obeyed God in the first place, things sure would be lots easier."

"Obedience, jah." Aunt Lizzie leaned forward. "Let me tell ya what I think."
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For I lie next half hour or so, Hannah listened as her aunt mhttrcil things she'd never heard from an Amishwoman before, except lor the one time she'd accidentally stumbled onto Muiinin saying late-night prayers. Now she was fairly sure tltil what Lizzie believed about the Lord Jesus coming to earth In die to offer eternal life was precisely what Mamma had also hr I It"veil. Hearing Aunt Lizzie say that we can be saved and know it without falling into the sin of pride, that the "Good I look teaches this," Hannah wondered what Gid might think il he knew. And she worried if Gid and the brethren got wind i >l Lizzie's beliefs, that her newly ordained husband would feel obligated to speak about them to Bishop Bontrager.

Could dear Aunt Lizzie be in danger of the shun? A cold kliver flew up Hannah's back.

Nearly as excited as the children had been at breakfast, I i-iih rode along in Dat's sleigh to Georgetown School after lunch. Sadie, too, had been invited to attend the Christmas piny, bift she'd awakened with sniffles and decided to stay home. Aunt Lizzie and Dawdi John had also been given I homemade invitations, but the children didn't expect Dawdi in make the effort to venture out on such a blustery day none of the family did. And Aunt Lizzie had felt she ought to

8fay put in case Hannah went into early labor, as she had with the first two little ones. Fortunately, she was only a holler nway in the little log house.

"Lydiann said she was awful nervous 'bout the play when

1 look her and Abe to school this morning," Leah said as they rode along. \ ' '::

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Dat made his familiar grunt, which meant he'd heard but was somewhat preoccupied.

"There'll be lots of parents on hand, I'm sure." She made yet another attempt to have conversation with her father, since they scarcely ever found themselves alone anymore.

"I hope we won't be expected to sing the weltlich carols," Dat said, glancing at her.

"Well, why not the more lighthearted ones?" She found this interesting.

He kept his face forward just now, and Leah thought she saw the corners of his mouth twitch.

"Dat? Did I speak out of turn?" ', . ,

His chest rose at the question. "No . . . no, that's fine."

She wished he'd talk about whatever was bothering him. Was he missing Mamma still, just as she was? Leah wouldn't be so bold as to bring up such a thing. All the same she wondered, though Mamma's home-going seemed a distant memory to her.

"I'm sure Lydiann and Abe are havin' trouble keeping their minds on their schoolwork right now," she said.

"They're prob'ly getting the schoolhouse ready, I'd guess."

"Jah, puttin' up string across the room to hang up letters spelling out 'Merry Christmas to Everyone!'" she said, glad Dat was talking freely.

He sighed. "Abe said he was mighty happy with the name he drew for Christmas."

"I hope he didn't tell ya who." She had to smile at this. "Abe's quite the little man ... as thoughtful as any child I've known." : "But he speaks his mind when he wants to." ' , . ; , ; :

She knew this was so. .. , . . :

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I I tat kepi I he horse going at a steady pace just right for a

Hi 11'I tnk nn a snowy afternoon.

I "Smile seems to be settling in here again, ain't so?" she

Hi I'll, sticking her neck out a bit.

H "I daresay she's missin' her husband something awful." Dat I Milked, bent his head low, and then continued. "She and I have Nomefhing in common for the first time."

I.tmh hadn't thought of it quite like that. But Dat was i mill, Both he and Sadie shared a great sense of sorrow.

l.ydiann took her seat as the teacher rang the bell on her >lenk, She couldn't keep a straight face, because Dat and Leah urre right here in this very room, sitting in the back with lots nl other folk parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, .it 111 hahies. It looked to her as if nearly all of Gobbler's Knob

11,ul lurned out for the school play.

I ler first-grade cousin, Essie Ebersol, stood at the front of i hi' loom and began to recite a poem. " 'Baby Jesus, meek and mild...' " *

When Essie returned to her seat, Lydiann knew it was time for a group of older boys to perform their skit. Following him, the boys sang "The First Noel" quite nicely, she thought. Their hoys with squeaky voices.

Soon the teacher started another carol, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," and everyone joined in heartily. Lydiann turned quickly and spied Mamma Leah with Dat, both of them singing and smiling.

What a wonderful-gut time of year, she thought. Looking over a few rows, she noticed Abe twiddling his fingers but

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singing, nonetheless. She couldn't remember ever hearing her little brother's voice in song at Preaching service, Abe always sat on the side with the menfolk, next to Dat.

She squirmed in her seat a bit, thinking ahead to what was to come. Would Carl remember his lines? Will I?

When the final note was sung, the teacher nodded to her and Carl, and to all the angels, shepherds, and wise men. Quickly the angelic host lined up behind Joseph and Mary, and the teacher brought out a wooden manger containing a small sack of potatoes wrapped in a blanket.

"Christ is born!" announced one of the shepherds.

"He is the King of kings," said a wise man.

Carl took a deep breath. "Let us all rejoice with the angels this day."

"Come see the place where the Christ child lay," added Lydiann, feeling a flutter of excitement as she reached down and lifted the holy bundle into her

arms. She was thankful their teacher had wrapped the potatoes very tightly. This way, she could hold the "baby" on her lap.

They went on to recite their rhymed verses, and Lydiann was pleased because she and Carl remembered every single word.

When the play was over, each student gave a gift of fruit or a candy cane to every other student, and to the teacher. But getting a big hug from Dat and a kiss on the cheek from Mamma Leah was the best gift of all. Both Lydiann and Abe climbed happily into the second seat of Dat's sleigh and called to their friends, "Merry Christmas!"

"Same to you!" their friends called back. ,... ' , .:49k e J r o dicj ai

When they returned home, it was time for Lydiann to <MiilM Mamma in cooking supper. Sadie was all wrapped up in

% blanket, sitting on the rocking chair near the wood stove, JO nlic wasn't feeling well enough to help. If Lydiann wasn't

IViInIuken, it looked to her like her eldest sister had been cry-

She went and offered Sadie a big round orange. "En hal-

'ii /ii'r Cirischtdaag! a merry Christmas to you."

Sadie looked up and smiled, accepting the gift. "Denki,"

Jk,' said softly.

And with that, Lydiann knew for sure and for certain

Sad it'wasn't only suffering from the sniffles.

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A midnight gale had come up and temperatures plummeted. Upon awakening to the dawn of Christmas, Leah was surprised at the thick layer of frost on the window as she lifted the green shade. Unable to peer out, she stared at the pretty pattern Jack Frost had painted. Once the sun rose over the eastern hills and its rays reached the house, the crust of ice would melt quickly. Then she would be able to see from this upstairs lookout what snowy new shapes the overnight drifting had created in the barnyard and beyond.

For now, though, she was eager to dress and hurry downstairs to make a special breakfast, one that would include baked oatmeal and raisins, baked eggs, and chocolate waffles with a homemade syrup of brown sugar and melted butter.

She lightly touched Sadie's sleeping form. "Merry Christmas to you, sister," she said softly, waiting for Sadie to rouse a bit. When she did, Leah asked if she felt well enough to help with milking, offering to take her place if she was still under the weather. But Sadie shooed her out of the room, saying she was just fine. Leah was surprised that Sadie was so adamant

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Leah determined to go out in the cold, especially when she'd (bit I no ill ro attend the school play yesterday. i!i Milking her way down the long stairs, she recalled Dad's (ittinrk about Abe and the drawing of names for today's gift iHC-hnntfi'. She couldn't help but notice how gleeful her boy BMtl hceii the past few days, but then he was downright happy HiiNt of I he time. And, too, she was quite aware that both tydlunn and Abe had been slipping over to the Dawdi Haus [I In! recently, and Aunt Lizzie and Dawdi John had been ItHivlive about whatever the children were doing.

(ioing to the back door, she discovered the same hard ill ml ing of frost on the windowpane and knew there was no yviyy to know what she might discover outside unless she |Mt'Mcd to curiosity and opened the door. When

she did so, Khe was amazed at the sweeping, arclike hollows beneath the
>HHf of each tree and the odd-shaped swells of white along hv lime that
led around to the bridge of the bank barn, where

5til and Gid had evenly placed large stones to rim the way. 'Ai'h, somebody
needs to shovel a path to the barn," she said o herself, surprised Dat wasn't
up yet.

I'll make sorm coffee right quick, she decided, closing the ioor to get a fire
going in the wood stove. Reaching for the jundle of wood Dat had
conveniently stacked in the utility Oom, probably before heading off to bed,
she realized sudlenly just how cold it was in the house. Why she hadn't
loticed before, she didn't know.

Lydiann will be shivering . . . and won't be shy about saying(i, she thought,
wondering if Aunt Lizzie was up already next Ioor, stoking the fire so
Dawdi John would awaken toJvanth. . . , , . , ' . . . ;. ...'...'

Making;,haste-to get the fire going in the wood stove now.

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she smiled at whose name she had drawn. What delightful surprises this day
held for all. She did wonder, though, how Hannah, Gid, and the girls would
make it down the long, snow-drifted hill to join them for the noon feast.
More than likely, Dat would have to take the horse and sleigh up there to
fetch them. She just hoped Hannah's baby wouldn't decide to come early,
what with the main roads nearly impassable. But no, 1 daresn't worry.
Besides, Hannah's baby isn't due quite yet.

When Dat still hadn't wandered into the kitchen fifteen minutes later, Leah decided to check on him to see if he had overslept. Making her way through the front room, she noticed his bedroom door was closed.

She hesitated to bother her father, but thinking he might be ill, she put her hand to the door and tapped gently. "Dat?" she called softly.

A slight shuffling sound followed, and then she heard his voice. "That you, Leah?"

"Jah."

"I'll be right out," he said, and she scurried back to the kitchen.

When the oatmeal had been poured into a greased pan and slid into the oven, Dat entered, looking somewhat disheveled. She offered him a cup of hot coffee, and he took it, blowing on it as he stood near the sink.

Abe joined them in the kitchen. "Looks like I'm not the only late riser," Dat said with a quick smile. "Merry Christmas to ya both."

"And to you, too, Dat," she said, returning his enthusiasm,

if Abe's eyes twinkled and he hurried to get his coat.

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I Sadie came downstairs at that moment, wearing a green

I i Inning dress and black apron with a rather bedraggled-

I liinking navy blue sweater. "It'll be right nippy in the barn,"

I he said, glancing down at the buttoned-up sweater, as if to

1 explain the old wrap.

I

I "Want some coffee?" Leah asked. "Or I can make hot

I 1< uoa, if you'd rather."

I Sadie shook her head. "Coffee's fine."

I "Did ya hear the wind howlin' last night?" Leah said as

I she poured a second cup of coffee, aware of Abe still tinkering

I around in the utility room.

I Sadie nodded, glancing away, but not before Leah noticed

I :i glistening in her sister's eyes. She suddenly felt sad and won-

I ilcred if this first Christmas as a widow would be as hard on

I Sadie as Dat's first without Mamma had been.

I She set about making hot cocoa for Abe and called to him

1 when the hot drink was ready. He came immediately, face

1 shining. "It's a right special day," he said with mischievous

I eyes. He reached for the cup. "Denki, Mamma."

f Mamma . . . The name never ceased to warm her heart.

When they'd drained their cups, Sadie and Dat bundled

up and headed outdoors with Abe. Dat shoveled a path as

Sadie and Abe came behind with their brooms. Leah watched

momentarily from the utility room, having closed the interior

door to the kitchen so as not to allow heat to escape. Please,

Lord God, be ever near to my sorrowing sister this day.

I While the oatmeal baked, she hurried to Dat's room to

I redd up and make his bed. But before she did, she went to the

\ narrow bookshelf and reached for Mamma's Bible, not the big

1 German family Bible stored in the corner cupboard in the

kitchen, but the one Mamma had read repeatedly through the

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years. Leah noticed the leather wasn't as cold as she might have expected it to be on such a chilly day and wondered if Dat might have been holding this Bible in his strong hands. . . for quite some time, too, maybe.

Heartened at the thought, she moved to the window and read the underlined final verse in chapter fifty-four of the book of the prophet Isaiah: No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is of me, saith the Lord.

The verse puzzled her no end, though she had read it repeatedly since first discovering Mamma's pen had marked it. What had this particular underlined passage meant to her mother? Leah was anxious to know.

Closing the Bible, she returned it to its place on the shelf. Then she smoothed out Dat's bedcovers, top quilt and all, and left to return to the kitchen. There she prepared the baked eggs, using Mamma's old muffin tins, placing the round pieces of toast, moistened with milk, inside and then breaking the eggs over the tops.

All the while she pondered the meaning of the verse, find' ing it peculiar Mamma would have contemplated it in such a way as to take pen to the Holy Bible. Was it possible Mamma had come under some verbal attack, possibly by the church brethren? If so, wouldn't Aunt Lizzie know?

Every tongue that shall rise against thee . . . Those words especially disturbed her. She knew she best cast aside her musings. 'Tis Christmas Day, for pity's sake.

Sighing, she went to the foot of the stairs to check on Lydiann, only to see her standing at the top, fully dressed, hair

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Omlx-il ;ind pulled back in a bun. "Happy Christmas, dear ill I," I i'ah greeted her.

I yJiiinn smiled broadly. "Merry Christmas to you, minima." Then she added, " 'Twas awful cold when my feet buclu'd che floor."

I.call nodded and had to smile. "Well, speakin' of cold, it k|yhl not be a bad idea for you to run out and take Sadie's llK'o alter a bit to let her come in and warm up. I'd hate for if lo catch an even worse cold."

[Lydiann headed down the steps toward her, eyes conIriK'd. "Is Sadie gonna cry again today, do ya think?"

"Well, I hope not. We must be especially considerate bwiird her on our Lord's birthday," Leah replied, walking with wiliinn to the kitchen. She hurried to prepare the waffle batK, setting the big black waffle iron on the cookstove.

Leah felt at such a loss to explain Sadie's absence for all hose years; the People simply did not speak of a shunning fter the fact. She hoped Lydiann's curiosity over Sadie might Bon subside. Not just for my sake, but for all of us.

I Leah was pleased when Lydiann willingly headed out to le barn to offer Sadie a rest. But when neither Lydiann nor Bilie came back, Leah bundled up to see what had happened. I'; idling the barn, she found Abe and Lydiann looking down I one of the feed troughs a wooden manger. Sadie, too, was It'ening with rapt attention as Dat described how the cows' Ingues had smoothed the wood over time, making the wood I the manger "nice and

smooth ... fit for baby Jesus." I Surprised at her father's words, Leah stood quietly as she

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observed the little gathering, which included their three German-shepherd dogs King, Blackie, and Sassafras in the nearly balmy atmosphere of the barn's stable area.

"God put the notion in the animals' heads?" Abe asked, touching the glistening wood with the full palm of his hand, clearly intrigued.

"Jah, I believe so." Dat stooped down, tugging on his long beard.

Lydiann looked up at Sadie just then, and Sadie put her arm around her young sister, who said, "The Lord God must've planned way ahead of time for Jesus to be born in a barn, ain't so?"

Dat nodded, even chuckled. "The Lord doeth all things well, and I daresay this is one of them."

Leah continued to watch silently as Dat spoke openly with the children. A long time comin', she thought, ever so glad. . : ' - ' . : . .

Hours later, after Dat had gone to fetch Gid, Hannah, and their girls in his sleigh, and after Mary Ruth had arrived by Dan Nolt's car, their father had everyone gather in the front room. He seemed almost too eager to read the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke before the noon meal.

But as intriguing as all this was, Leah was most captivated by the attentive way Aunt Lizzie watched Dat during his read' ing of the old Bible. Can it be she has feelings for Dat, too?

After the noontime feast, and once all the dishes and utensils were washed, dried, and put away, the family was

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ir;idy for the gift exchange Lydiann and Abe had been awaiting so patiently.

They assembled in the front room once again, and Abe promptly marched to Dat's side and presented his gift of a I Kind written, homemade book. Dat smiled when he turned to I he first page and saw the printed names and birth dates of each family member, along with several Scripture verses, all In Abe's own hand. "I learnt them from Aunt Lizzie," the boy : explained, looking over at Lizzie and grinning.

Next Lydiann approached Leah. "I drew your name, Mamma," she said, holding out her gift.

"Oh, Lyddie, how perty!" Leah accepted the embroidered handkerchief.

"I made it myself," whispered Lydiann, "but with Aendi's help."

I Leah hugged her girl close. "Denki, dear one . . . I'll treasure it for always."

"Look at the butterfly," Lydiann said, pointing to a fanciful green butterfly suspended over a yellow rosebud.

"I see . . . and it's very nicely done." For a moment Leah likenedsjit to the butterfly handkerchief hidden deep in her hope chest, although this one featured a simple embroidery stitch, not the elaborate cutwork style that Hannah had longago made for Sadie.

Glancing now at her elder sister, who was seated next to Hannah with eighteen-month-old Katie Ann on her lap, Leah wondered when or if she might return the beautiful hankie to Sadie. But no, the connection to Sadie's stillborn son might easily mar the holy day, and that would be heartless. She dismissed the idea quickly, at least for the time being. j When Aunt Lizzie was not so occupied with Dawdi John,

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Leah slipped to her side and gave Lizzie the gift she'd purchased. "I had your name," she whispered, handing her a small case filled to the brim with many colored spools of thread and sewing notions.

Lizzie was pleased. "Oh, just what I needed!" she said, giving Leah a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you ever so much."

Hannah and Gid's oldest daughter, three-year-old Ida Mae, giggled as she licked a candy cane. Squirming out of Sadie's lap, Katie Ann toddled to big sister, Ida, for repeated tastes. "That's awful nice of you to share your treat," Hannah said, touching Ida's chubby cheek.

Gid sat with his arm protectively draped behind his wife's chair, looking mighty pleased about the box of saws and other items given him by his father-in-law. Leah suspected Abe wanted to tell in the worst way how Dat had "kept at it" to win them at the auction.

"Now, don't be tellin' stories out of school," Dat was heard to say to his exuberant son.

Abe frowned comically and went to sit beside Leah. "My mouth's gonna get me in trouble yet," he told her softly.

She patted his arm. "You're just fine."

The merriment continued on through a good half of the afternoon, till time for milking rolled around again. Gid rose with Abram at four o'clock and told both Sadie and Abe to

"stay put."

Not putting up a fuss, Sadie smiled her thanks, and the two men left the house for the barn.

"I wonder if the manger is even smoother now," Abe whispered to Leah. "For baby Jesus' birthday, ya know."

She, her old Gid

Leah was touched by her boy's remark, and she pulled him into her arms. "Come here and don't be sayin' you're too nli, I finl a big hug," she said, her heart truly gladdened by the ilny,

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V/n the walk to the barn, Abram was suddenly aware of the heavy moisture content of the recent snow. Every tree branch, every shrub, and even the roof of the old corncrib sagged with the weight. Several large limbs had snapped under the burden, and he made a mental note to turn them into firewood tomorrow.

Meanwhile, he and Gid had the afternoon milking to tend to, and feeling the cold creep through his work jacket and trousers, Abram quickened his pace toward the barn, as did his son-in-law.

Inside, they washed down the cows' udders, pushed tin buckets beneath, and perched themselves on low wooden stools, talking in quiet tones as they milked by hand. The dogs, all three of them, rested in the hay nearby. Blackie eyed them fondly and wagged his long tail while Abram listened without commenting as Gid mentioned their desire to have a hex doctor at the birthing of their third child. "Not in place of a midwife, mind you ... just in case something goes wrong. What do ya think of that?"

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"Why y.iaskin'me?"

"Well, Vihiso Hannah said she and Aunt Lizzie had been nil- Hi1 il over,"

Ahum was fairly sure if Lizzie and Hannah had hashed it Hit, .1. < Mil said, that Lizzie would've had her say and then gnu ' >i ill, he didn't want to butt in since Gid was Hannah's UmUtuil iikI the man of his house. Abram saw

no point, iriily, In speaking his mind, because far as he knew, Gid had
UhimI through Lizzie what his stand on powwowing was. "Yon don't need
my two cents' worth." "No ... no, Hannah and I want your opinion." I k1
toyed with saying straight out they ought to have as no h help with
Hannah's delivery as possible, especially if she it'i lecling nervous for any
reason. If that meant having the twwovv doctor, then all well and good. He
certainly didn't FHul 10 he held responsible for their making a bad decision,
lill loo mindful of all that had gone wrong when Ida birthed

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It- went ahead and told Gid how he'd kicked himself for having the Amish
doctor on hand for Ida that terrible

Ilnlil. "I'd d t things completely different now if I could." jrWim.y to have
saved Ida's life. . . .Yri his wife's feelings had mattered, too. Ida's opinion
had ways mattered to him, thus the reason he'd let her have her .iy now and
again, although he had managed to rule his roost, l-i-eping the upper hand
for the most part. Sadly that sort of iippmnch had caused great strife and
despair for his family, as I if had seen all too clearly for some time now.
Looking back, I if realized how rigid he'd been about Leah's choice of a
mate, IliiI lie kicked himself every time he thought of her being a (in ulei.
He had been equally harsh with Mary Ruth, insisting

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on his own way when it appeared Hannah's twin was as content as can be
teaching English schoolchildren, boarding with the Nolts, and attending the
Mennonite church. The truth pained him, making it difficult for him to
stand by and watch the circumstances unfold. On the other hand, he
believed in the deep of his heart that his daughter had somehow found her
intended way, although the path she trod no longer embraced the teachings
of the Amish church. It wasn't that she didn't look Plain any longer; she did.
But the manner Mary Ruth talked about the Lord God heavenly Father was

somewhat foreign to his way of seeing things, though not to his Ida's. . . nor to Lizzie's. More and more, he was making the discovery that Ida's Lord was the same as Mary Ruth and Lizzie's, having spent many early morning hours reading and rereading his wife's well-loved Bible, particularly the passages she'd taken time to underline. Truth be known, he was learning far more than he'd ever expected from such an undertaking.

"Should I take this question up with the bishop?" Gid's voice broke the stillness.

Abram knew better than to encourage Gid to speak with Bishop Bontrager on the matter. Why, the whole thing could blow up in Gid's face ... in all of their faces, really. The issue of sympathy healers was troublesome amongst the Amish had the power to divide the church district right down the middle.

"Make up your own mind and stick with it. Do what you think is best for your family."

Gid went on to say that his mother was downright opposed and didn't think "white witchcraft" had any business being invited into the sacred places of their home. "Mamm

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I i.e. :.pokcn out quite adamantly 'bout keepin' the hex doctors l,n I mm our door."

Ahram nodded, considerate of Gid's position stuck I hi wren the opinion of his wife and his mother. Not a good l>l.uv to be for a young man of Gid's character and calling. A hi am suggested Gid and Hannah talk further on it.

"Then you must not view powwowing as of the devil, like my mother does."

Gid had him there, and there was no telling how far this conversation might drift from its origins. "What's the Good hook say on it?" Abram surprised

himself by asking but felt sure Gid knew him well enough not to hold such a question against him.

"I don't know. Haven't stumbled onto anything just yet."

Abram grunted, wishing he had something pertinent to say, but he didn't.

In the end, Gid would have to decide for his family. Even so, Abram wondered what difference it made if the blue lohosh herb was used to induce labor when needed, nor did it bother him if a bit of necessary chanting went on. No bother at all. On the other hand, he couldn't get Ida's view on the matter out of his mind.

Mary Ruth sat with Hannah in the front room, near Lydiann and Abe, who were playing with their games at Leah's feet while snacking on the popcorn balls and hard candies they'd received as presents from their neighbors, the Peacheys. Mary Ruth was delighted to hold sweet little Katie Ann on her lap, especially because the toddler's usually bright eyes were looking mighty droopy just now, and Mary Ruth hoped the dear girl might give in to sleep right there in her

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arms. Oh, how she enjoyed Hannah's little ones, and the joy of being around them stirred up such eagerness as she looked ahead to the day when she might marry and become a mother herself. She wouldn't dare to think too far into the future, though, because she strongly believed the Lord had called her to teach. She was living the life she'd long wished for, sharing her book knowledge with youngsters who had thirsty minds, ever glad to be able to share the love of the Lord Jesus with her students through word and deed.

Holding Katie Ann and listening to Ida Mae's childish chatter helped fill the hours, as did spending the day with her sisters. She was rather relieved to

see how well Sadie was doing now that she had been home these two months, and Leah, too, was smiling more genuinely than she had been at past Christmases, at least that Mary Ruth could recall.

" 'Tis awful nice of Gid to help Dat with milkin'," Leah told Sadie.

Sadie nodded, glancing at Abe. "Looks like more than one of us got to stay in where it's warm, ain't?"

To this, Abe looked up from his checkers and grinned. "I wouldn't have minded goin' out in the cold," he said. "I'm a strong one, I am."

This brought a round of "ohs," and Abe put his head down, visibly embarrassed.

"Won't be long and you'll be takin' Sadie's place all the time at milkin'," Lydiann spoke up, pausing in her play with her two faceless dolls.

"Now, Lyddie, that ain't for you to say," Sadie pointed out.

Mary Ruth found the exchange between Abe and Sadie to be amusing and, looking down, discovered Katie Ann had

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1,11 leu limp in her arms. "Look who's tuckered out." She
nuilm-il Hannah.

I lannah smiled. "You've got a tender touch."

Mary Ruth scooted back in her chair, being careful not to
n-|;ix loo much lest the crook of her arm not support her pre-
i1 it him niece.

Some time later Lydiann's remark about Carl Nolt made Miiry Ruth pay closer attention yet again to the conversation. L.yJdie was mentioning Carl's

New Year's Eve invitation "I le said his parents want all us Ebersols to have supper with I hem. Carl told me himself yesterday after the school play," I ydiann happily announced. "I know he meant it, because lie's the sort of boy who doesn't fib. You can just tell."

"You're absolutely right about that," Mary Ruth spoke up, rortain Dottie must've shared this with Carl.

"Could ya ask about this, Mary Ruth?" Lydiann pleaded.

Leah stirred, appearing somewhat uncomfortable. "Well, dear one, I thiftk we best wait to see if an invitation comes directly from Carl's parents."

"Jah, I think that's wise," Mary Ruth said, backing Leah up. "Wouldn't be right to just assume it."

"But you don't understand," Lydiann broke in. "Carl was sure ... I know he was!"

Leah reached down and put a hand on Lydiann's shoulder, patting her. "Best not fret. There'll be plenty to do here at home this week while school's out."

"Plenty gut things to eat, too!" Abe piped up a bit too I loudly.

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Mary Ruth couldn't help but smile. Leah surely had her hands full with these two that was easy to see yet her sister seemed as content as ever she'd known her to be. For this, Mary Ruth was most grateful.

Sadie wandered out to the kitchen while the happy gathering continued in the front room. She poured fresh cow's milk into a saucepan and set it on the fire, stirring the milk slowly lest it scald. She would surprise her sisters and the children with hot chocolate.

From where she stood at the wood stove, she could see past the utility room, through the back door window, and out to the white expanse of snow in the barnyard. When will I see Miriam Peachey again? Miriam had been so compassionate to her through the scrutiny thus far. Though Sadie was expected to spend time with the older women in the church district whenever she left the house, it was primarily Miriam who had been appointed to oversee her comings and goings. This meant she couldn't go much of anywhere alone, except to visit Hannah and the children, or across the pasture and field to the Peachey's. She terribly missed her long jaunts on foot, feeling like a caged bird at times.

Presently she stared at the snow weighing down the treetops. The bitter cold would surely visit them again tonight, and she thought of bringing in some wood to stack. Maybe she would tiptoe downstairs in the night to add some logs to the wood stove, like Dat used to before he moved to the downstairs bedroom at the quiet far end of the house. Now he no longer awakened at midnight or after, which meant the upstairs grew cold by morning, and Lydiann's sharp yelps could be plainly heard when she first stepped out of bed. Abe,

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in flic other hand, was all boy strong, as he had declared to
Bill ill' them this afternoon, and afraid of nothing, least of all
ike cold plank flooring. He climbed jagged tree trunks and
l"oiij,'h stone walls, even crawling halfway up the silo one day
B-iisi October, to Leah's dismay and Dat's forced laughter,
Jiiuigh Dat's face had turned ever so pasty. Some boys are just
mum tougher than others, Dat had said with a healthy dose of
Bride, but Sadie decided, then and there, that Dat viewed
Mio's daring from the standpoint of previously having raised

inly girls.

I All that aside, both Lydiann and Abe were the happiest
1)1 children, and their cheerful faces reminded her of earlier
liiys growing up in this old farmhouse, when she and Mamma
i:id been ever so close, spending all day together cooking and
miking, cleaning and talking ... as fond of each other as
lydiann and Abe were of Leah now.

B "Anybody for hot chocolate?" She sang the question as
Bhe carried the tray into the front room.

"Ach, we'll come to you," Leah said, meeting her halfway.
No need to risk spills with youngsters."

f' That waSjjLeah, always thinking on the practical side. No
wonder Mamma had chosen her to raise Abe and Lydiann.
No wonder Aunt Lizzie looked ever so kindly on Leah; each
t ime Sadie happened to glance at her aunt, she was aware of
that deep admiration.

Tuesday, December 25, 1956 Dear Diary,

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I feel sure it won't be long now and our new baby will make his or her
entrance into this world. Goodness, it would be awful nice if we'd have a

boy to help Gid and Dat and young Abe with the outdoor work. Leah encourages Lydiann to be out in the barn and whatnot more than I see necessary. But, more and more, Leah and Dat are having equal say in the raising of Lydiann and Abe, seems to me. I suppose that is both good and bad, although I'd have to agree with Gid that Leah dotes on Abe rather too much. She's awful protective of him, even saying he isn't old enough to go ice fishing with Dat, Gid, and Smitty come this Saturday, but Abe begged and pleaded and got Dat to intervene but quick. So they're all planning to go over to Blackbird Pond early that morning, more than likely as soon as milking's through. I hope I have this baby before then. Most uncomfortable I'm becoming!

Gid and I have together decided there's nothing whatsoever wrong with having the Hexedokder wait in the front room when I go into labor with this one. just knowing that, I'm already feeling much better . . . whether or not my mother-inlaw's in favor of this. She's beginning to irk me some, what with all the say-so she's been given by the bishop, no less in overseeing Sadie's Proving. Give some folk a bit of authority and they crave even more. I hope Sadie behaves herself, truly I do, but it's hard to know what's going on in her head, let alone her heart. She seems more brooding than I remember her to be ... and no wonder, given what she's gone through.

Last night I had a troubling dream, one I don't know what to make of. All of us were gathered, sniffing, in a small, dark room, surrounded by unrecognizable sounds. Dat's face was drained of color, and he was struck dumb, unable to speak. Leah, though I recognized only her form, stood tall, like a beacon of light in the dimness. Since I don't normally have such dreams, I wonder if this was a result of all the sweets I've been

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iiiihlmv on this week. Then again, I hope it's not a bad omen. /i'i Mire and for certain, we've had our share of heartache mmul here.

Respectfully,

Hannah

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iv lidmorning Thursday Abram and Gid cut down the dead branches left dangling by the heavy snows, spending a good part of the sunny but cold morning dragging chopped limbs into the woodshed to dry. Abram enjoyed working with his son-in-law and he told him so. "You just don't know how lonely an old man I'd be without ya workin' by my side."

Gid looked at him cockeyed, as if to indicate he wasn't used to hearing such soft words from a man. "You ain't old, Abram."

"Oh, but I feel my age ev'ry morning when I rise. Besides that, my baby boy is seven today."

Gid went about stacking the branches, remaining silent, as if waiting for him to continue.

"Next farm auction, you and I oughta go together. Abe will prob'ly jump at the chance to miss a day of school, too, 'cept Leah will frown on that." He rambled on, saying how well both Abe and Lydiann were doing in their studies. "I can only hope they don't get the notion to seek after higher education like Mary Ruth did."

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I Al'iiim wouldn't admit to worrying like an old hen some ly* nl 11 ml losing more of his family to the fancy English Mifhl. No way, nohow, did it

look like Mary Ruth would ever Vi ii|> I it-1- new life, with its electricity, fast cars, and Bible wdit I;act was, she was getting herself in deeper all the nt, ^^ 11:11 with spending nearly all her free time with the Hjjet'oi':. elder son, Robert. Well, he had no intention of letfcg In:, mind wander in that direction, so he straightened MdiM'll 'ind asked Gid what he thought about asking Gid's fnlht'i in-law Sam Ebersol to join them for ice fishing on tuiday.

Wp C iid nodded his assent.

I "I'll ride over there and talk to Sam this afternoon, then," bruin said. "We'll have us some tasty fish to fry up for supper A|h weekend." The thought of the catch and the time of felinwship sent his spirits soaring.

I ;ol lowing the noon meal, Sadie dried and put away the li.hes anckutensils, then headed to the front room, where she ii to finish stitching a floral design on a set of pillowcases i hat had arrived a month ago in the trunk containing her u-dding gifts and small household linens from Indiana. When 11 ic sudden sound of knocking came at the front door, she was uiprised to see the mailman standing on the porch.

"Good afternoon," the man wearing the familiar postal Ii,n said. "Sorry to bother you on this cold day, but I thought M hest to be extra careful with this letter delivery." He held iii11 to her a stained envelope with the words Return to sender .Limped across the front. "Looks like this here got lost

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somehow or other," he said, pointing out the October 1947 postmark, "nine years ago now."

Sadie nodded her astonished thanks and stood at the door holding the letter marred and frayed by the years. Upon careful examination of its terribly faded writing, she was stunned to realize it was an unopened letter from Leah to Jonas Mast. Somehow it had found its way to the Ebersol Cottage.

Could this be the letter I threw away?

Turning it over, she saw the envelope was soiled, as if it had, indeed, been in a pile of rubbish at one time. Yet how on earth had it resurfaced after nearly a decade?

Impossible, she thought, noticing the letter was still sealed shut.

Having attempted to bury the shameful deed deep within her forgetfulness, she felt convicted as she stared at the envelope, evidence of her wrongdoing.

What should I do now?

She and Leah had forged a new relationship these months since Sadie's return, and she was far too hesitant to open up an old and hurtful wound. Besides, there'd been many letters flying back and forth between Leah and Jonas when this letter was written.

She'd thrown it away once in the heat of anger; why not discard it again? Better yet. . . burn it. Coming clean about this dreadful thing would serve no purpose now. Best to leave things be, let the truth remain concealed and her sin covered up once and for all.

Or, better still, she could simply slip the letter into the mailbox for Leah to discover on her own. No confession required. Even though Leah might wonder why Jonas had never opened the letter, or why it was being returned all these

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til'!*! lult'i, Siulic's part in its disappearance would remain

fadlm nvciid. Besides, wasn't she already paying for past sins?

pU1 implied Proving was proof, and she could never ever go

MM l mill nj.;lil nil the wrongs.

I Num,'inj; ihoughts tormented her as she paced the floor.

Rlhr nil, I his letter was by no means her property. Leah

li ived tn have it returned to her with a full apology.

I What will good-hearted Leah think of me? Will she despise me?

In crlnjvd at the prospect of the confession Leah surely

'- i veil.

I Vci ilk- lact Leah seemed so jovial, what with today being

I|m ' , birthday and all, made Sadie feel her sister might take

llr news of the long-lost letter awful hard.

I Not today, she thought. Nothing good would come of the

mil iliis day. Heart pounding, she slipped the letter into her

Iff v. pocket and hurried upstairs, where she deposited it

plvvccn several layers of clothing in her own drawer in the

111 bureau.

I Ivi-ling justified in her choice to ignore this for the time

JfiK. with Leah's best interest at heart, Sadie hurried back

BWiisirs and picked up her sewing with trembling hands.

j I cab was glad to get out and breathe some fresh air that ltd noon. Abe and
Lydiann were filled with chatter during Ir buggy ride to visit Uncle Jesse

Ebersol and his family, and rub was hoping her dearest friend, Adah, might be on hand, I well. Sadie had also agreed to come along, though not as Berly as Leah would have thought, seeing as they'd all been her cooped up in the house. For her part, Aunt Lizzie had

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looked a bit droopy in the face when Leah announced they were heading over to Jesse's for an afternoon visit. Lizzie felt she ought to stay home with Dawdi John something it seemed to Leah was becoming her lot in life. Leah felt a twinge of sadness at the thought of Aunt Lizzie once again missing out on an opportunity to do the kind of visiting she so thoroughly enjoyed, and Leah promptly decided she would offer to stay behind next outing.

"Too bad Lizzie couldn't join us," Dat said when they were about halfway there.

"She's such a kindhearted soul, never complains 'bout tending to Dawdi's needs," Leah agreed.

Dat turned and smiled at her full in the face. "Sounds like someone else I know." He clicked his tongue and the horse sped up some.

"Oh, for goodness' sake," Leah said, catching on.

Sadie, sitting to Leah's left, patted her sister's shoulder. "Jah, 'tis for goodness' sake!"

Dat said no more, and Leah was suddenly conscious of Lydiann's voice in the seat behind her. "You daresn't tell nobody," Lydiann was saying, soft and low, to her brother.

"I won't promise not to tell," Abe said. "That's girl talk."

"No . . . no, now you listen to me," Lydiann's voice grew louder for a moment, then softer.

From that, Leah assumed Lydiann was cupping her hand around Abe's ear. Evidently she was not to be privy to the rest of this furtive conversation, and she wasn't so sure she cared to be, especially when the name of Carl Nolt was mentioned several times in the space of the next few seconds.

Leah remembered what she had been thinking and doing as a girl Lydiann's age. Nearly all her waking hours had been

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jpenn working around the animals feeding and watering them, cleaning the stalls, working with Dat in the fields, too. Thankfully Mamma had birthed Abe, which meant Lydiann imild learn to cook and sew at a young age, unlike Leah, who hud never attended a quilting frolic till she was nearly sixteen.

1 >lu- smiled, recalling that first quilting, how she'd pulled up a I hair to the enormous frame where the colorful Diamond-ini he-Square pattern was to be stitched. So much water had passed under the bridge since that September day. Truly now .he was her own person, with the Lord God's help, and mighty glad of it, too. Gone were the days of longing for what .'.lie didn't have, and she was as content as when she had been j (rowing up under Dat's and Mamma's watchful eyes on their peaceful farm.

Sadie startled her out of her reverie. "Oh, lookee there, Leah. Adah's come."

Sure enough, dear Adah was getting down out of the family carriage, her two young sons already scurrying about as she turned to wave.

She looks so happy, thought Leah. Adah's husband, Sam, Leah's fir* cousin, was a hardworking and kind man, and as Sam and Adah picked their way through the snow toward the big clapboard farmhouse, Leah recognized again how nice it was that Adah was now her cousin, as well as her closest friend.

"If Adah and Sam are here, don't ya think Smitty and Miriam might just show up, too?" Leah asked, hoping so for Sadie's sake, since heavy snow had kept any of them from romping through the drifts to visit the Peachey farm the past few days. Smitty had driven over in his sleigh to deliver pretty bags of hard candy and nuts for Lydiann and Abe on

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Christmas Eve, but none of them had ventured out on foot to take baked goods to Miriam Peachey, who, she'd heard, was looking ahead to vacating the main farmhouse and moving into the Dawdi Haus come spring. Dorcas, their youngest, and her husband, Sam Ebersol's best friend, Joseph Zook, and little ones planned to take over the Peachey farm. From what Dat had told Leah, Smitty wasn't quite ready to throw in the towel and fully retire; he would keep a hand in shoeing horses, gradually turning over more of his customers to Gid as time went by.

As Dat brought the horse to a stop, Lydiann broke the stillness, telling Abe what Carl had recently told her at school. "A two-year-old Amish neighbor boy named Johnnie Weaver drank some kerosene and had to be rushed to the emergency room last week," she said. . . .

"No foolin'?" Abe replied. :

"I guess he was okay once he got some oxygen."

"Why'd he want to drink something so awful?" asked Abe.

To this Leah said nothing, enjoying the innocent exchange as she hopped down from the buggy and fell in step with Sadie.

"It's beyond me why," said Lydiann. "But you can ask Carl 'bout it when we see him on New Year's Eve."

Lydiann may be sadly disappointed, thought Leah, fairly sure that even if they were invited to the Nolts' place for a meal, Dat would decline.

Sadie noticed Uncle Jesse's face light up when he came to the back door and saw who was there. Her uncle grabbed Dat and slapped him on the back, mighty glad indeed to see his younger brother. And right away she spotted Miriam Peachey

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over in the table, whispering to Aunt Mary Ebersol, pointing their way. Perhaps they've come to celebrate Abe's birthday, too, flniii^hi Sadie.

I Siulie's guess turned out to be true when Aunt Mary Brought out a bowl of butterscotch pudding, as well as a rich chocolate pie, hermits, and pecan drops. Sadie helped Aunt p1uiy and Miriam set out a stack of plates and the necessary Ijlcisils, but when it came time to serve the desserts, only Lydiann, Abe, and Adah's boys, along with the women folk, in down to eat. The men Uncle Jesse, Dat, Smitty, and mm- nil stood around the wood stove talking Dutch. Sadie Hiiln'l wish to eavesdrop, but she couldn't help but hear Dat In viI ing Uncle Jesse and Cousin Sam to join in Saturday's iceinhing outing.

I Sadie couldn't see what was so appealing about that. K'/iur'.s the point of sitting outside and freezing yourself for a coupleIfjish?

I Miriam slid in next to her on the wooden bench, reaching In I lie butterscotch pudding. "Your mamma loved her pudIllngs," Miriam said, glancing at Sadie but then looking over

I1 Lydiann and A be, across the table.

I "Did she have a favorite?" asked Abe.

Miriam paused and frowned a moment. "Well, now, I'll
li'l your big sister Sadie might know that."

I Sadie smiled, recalling many happy hours making a variety
If aistards and puddings in Mamma's big kitchen. "She loved
Ihc smell of chocolate pudding, that's for sure. But a favorite?
I guess I'd have to say either graham-cracker or date pudding."

I "Oh jah," added Miriam. "Your mamma loved her date
ludding, she did."

I Lydiann had both her elbows on the table now as she

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stared across at Miriam. "Our first mamma was your best friend, ain't so?"
she said.

Miriam blushed all shades of red. "Well, I'd have to say I thought of her as
my closest friend, jah."

"And I'd have to say my best friend's a boy," Lydiann piped up in response.
"A Mennonite boy!"

Abe clapped his hand over his mouth, looking at Lydiann, who must have
realized how she'd sounded. "Best be eatin' more and talkin' less," he said,
repeating one of Dawdi's sayings as he poked her in the ribs.

Adah's little boys were busy with their bowls of pudding and too small to have caught the embarrassing banter between Abe and Lydiann. But Miriam hadn't missed it, not one iota; Sadie knew this because she'd heard a gasp escape Miriam's lips.

"Are ya havin' a happy birthday, Abe?" Miriam asked, her voice pitched higher than usual.

Sadie felt as though she might lose her composure and start laughing, although she was ever so sure such an outburst might not be the wisest thing for a widow in mourning. Besides that, Miriam was sitting only a few inches away from her. What would she say if she also knew of Sadie's reluctance to return Leah's letter and make a heartfelt apology?

Thoughts of the rigid period, penance for her sins, calmed her quickly, and she sat back and became an observer, immersing herself in the cheerful chatter, especially between the birthday boy and his next-oldest sister. Sadie's gaze drifted to Leah. To think she had, all those long, sad years, assumed Sadie had been married to Jonas, yet she showed Sadie not a hint of past bitterness now. Today especially, Sadie found herself wishing for a tongue-lashing from her sister, if not worse.

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ihily, Leah exemplified a forgiving spirit, just as Mamma had l|l lief day-,
111 it surely there were limits even for someone like

f There, in the midst of the laughter and the celebrating, Indie fell ;is sad as could be, missing both her husband and piithef. She'd thought she would have a lifetime with Harvey, fiul here she was a widow. Had she taken their wedded hapnllii'NM for granted? She felt torn between longing for Harvey Ifid believing she'd squandered Mamma's final years, yet had [In *i'nyed put in Gobbler's Knob with Mamma, she never L'uiil have met and fallen in love with her Harvey. Oh, ji iineilines there was just no sorting through emotions so raw Id' I unnerving.

I When the dishes were cleared away, washed, and dried, Pud it? sat in the front room with Miriam, glad to be alone f\\\\ Mamma's bosom friend.

"How are ya feelin' this week, it win' Christmas and all?" asked Miriam, touching the back of Lidio's hand.

I "Well, it's not the happiest Christmas I've ever had," she liliiiiied. "But it's wunderbaar'gut being back home in Goblin'1, Knob. ^'ve been enjoying the fun with Lydiann and

khf."

E Miriam nodded, her eyes intent on Sadie. "But ya must be unking 'bout your loss, too."

I 'idie looked down at her black apron, so much a part of Li daily attire. It was cut from the same bolt of fabric as her huiirning dress, making it difficult to tell where one began Bid I lie other ended. "Some days I think I might wear black |ii iesi of my life." For all the deaths ... She didn't say what In was really thinking, because she'd confided only in Leah pyiinling the many stillbirths.

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" 'Course you'd be thinkin' thataway," Miriam said, sighing. "Harvey's passing is still fresh in your mind."

"He was a good man," Sadie said. "He never lost his temper that I know of, not once. He spoke kindly of everyone, and he got along famously with all his siblings."

Miriam listened, her gaze not straying from Sadie's. "How many brothers and sisters?"

"Five brothers and three sisters." Lest Miriam wonder why Harvey's siblings hadn't invited her to live with one of them, Sadie explained that, after his death, she had felt the Lord God was calling her home to Lancaster County.

"Oh, such a blessed thing to hear, Sadie! Does our bishop know of this?"

"No ... I said not a word." She wouldn't reveal she cared not one whit for Bishop Bontrager, not as far as she was into the Proving now. If he knew the full truth about her, would he consider even this punishment too slight? Surely he would, but Sadie couldn't bear much more, most days wishing she could simply blend into the mopboards.

"I'm thinkin' he oughta know," Miriam was saying. " 'Tis high time."

"Please, no. . . . Let's just keep that between us... and my family. No need to tell the bishop." She felt so strongly about this, tears sprang up.

"Ach, Sadie, I'm ever so sorry I said a word." Miriam leaned forward. "I'm just awful glad you're back with us, and I'm sure your father feels the same."

All Sadie could do was nod, her heart heavy under a weight of her own making. ,

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1 here was a special quietude at the midafternoon hour Lorniine Schwartz had always taken pleasure in, especially in summertime when the heat of the day required a catnap or, at least, a rest from the fierce sun. This Friday, though, was not to be compared in the slightest with the dog days of late July or August. The old year was dying fast, and she had drawn rhe curtains and curled up by the roaring fire Henry had kindly built for her in the handsome tiled fireplace not too many feet from her easy chair. With a cup of chamomile tea in hand, she had been reading the Scriptures until the telephone's ringing prompted her to rise and pick up the black receiver.

"Schwartz residence. Lorraine speaking."

"Hello, Lorraine. It's Dottie Nolt."

"Oh, how are you today?"

"We're just fine, thanks. How was your Christmas?"

"Quiet. . . but very nice. You?"

Dottie shared how she and Dan had enjoyed watching Carl unwrap his presents and that their son had been especially

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pleased at receiving a new sled. "But the reason I'm calling is to invite you and Henry for supper on New Year's Eve."

"Well, how thoughtful of you." Lorraine knew they had no plans whatsoever. "I'll check with my husband, but I think it's safe to say we'll accept. Thank you, Dottie. What can I bring?"

"Just yourselves. This is Dan's and my treat. We're inviting several neighbors, and Mary Ruth will be here, as well, so please extend the invitation to your son Robert."

"I will indeed."

"We also plan to invite Mary Ruth's family."

"That'll be nice to get better acquainted," said Lorraine.

Minutes later, when Henry came in from the clinic, she shared with him Dottie's kind invitation.

He stiffened visibly. "You didn't accept, did you?"

"Well, yes, I did." She was puzzled by his response.

Henry shook his head. "Call back and decline . . . say we have other plans."

"But we don't, dear. We would simply be alone on New Year's Eve, unless, of course, Robert should decide to stay home and not spend the evening with Mary Ruth. But I hardly think he'll want to do that."

Again Henry shook his head, frowning deeply. "Please call Dottie back, Lorraine."

His words reached her ears, but it was her memory that served her best. Henry was resistant, most likely, because the Nolts were mainly responsible for her renewed interest in church.

It was Robert's arrival at the front door that brought the conversation to a quick end, for which Lorraine was grateful. And when the first thing out of his mouth was "Dottie Nolt's

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\nii' ;i New Year's Eve dinner party, and we're all invited,"

- w;i:, M-t-rctly relieved.

I li;ii said, Henry dropped his opposition.

(ii mi/, she thought, no need for me to embarrass myself with, n'turu j'hone call to Dottle. Robert obviously had more influi mi e over Henry than she ever would.

< iid paced the floor in the front room of the log house,

< 'Tpinj; now and then to keep Ida Mae and Katie Ann occu-

i" (I witli their toys. He was nearly tempted to stand with his

ii in I be door of the birthing room, where he felt sure Han-
ii ill was in the final throes of labor. Against his mother's
i .lies, lie had summoned one of the men hex doctors, who
'i nui hut a few yards from him on a rocking chair, watching
llic ijirls play. Hannah had been disappointed to discover that
i Hil I ;uly Henner, the most powerful Amish doctor in the
Mien, no longer made house visits, so they'd had to settle for
T11in solemn-looking man.

.Af (Past he's someone to talk to, he thought, carrying The /liii/iyr over and
offering a section of the newspaper to the i ill lei~ man. "Got any relatives
out in Ohio?" he asked, hoping |n niiike small talk.

"Two cousins." :

"Ever go V visit?"

"Nope."

Not so keen on conversing with a brick wall, Gid wanil. n-d to the kitchen,
poured himself a tall glass of water, and .i"oil af the back door, staring out
at the open woods, deprived now of leaves. The sky had opened up some,
and he

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was grateful for the light, conscious as he was at this moment of the
seasonal rhythms of his own life.

This waiting was difficult, a good test of his patience, and he contemplated the Old Ways: the father-to-be hiding behind a newspaper, uninvolved, or pacing the floor somewhere in the house. Hannah had once told him there were some women who simply slipped behind a bush of a summer and had their wee babes unattended. He flinched at the thought of darling Hannah having to birth her babies that way. Not as long as he could ride for a midwife and, in this case, the hex doctor, too would his wife give birth alone. Leah had planned on being on hand, as well, but hearing of Hannah's insistence on having the hex doctor come, Leah had hastily changed her mind, to Hannah's disappointment.

When the cries of a newborn pierced the air, he felt strangely relieved that the midwife had managed to deliver his son or daughter without the help of the man in the sitting room.

Hurrying to the bedroom door, Gid waited for word to come from the midwife. When it did, he was told he and Hannah had a third daughter. "She's a rosy one," the midwife said, motioning for him to enter the room.

He made a beeline for his wife, leaning down to kiss Hannah's brow, then cupping her chin in his hand. "Ich lieb dich, Hannah." He pushed back a wispy strand of her strawberryblond hair.

"Oh, Gid, I love you." She held up his new daughter, now wrapped in a thin blanket. "Awful perty, she is."

"Have ya thought of a name?"

Hannah smiled up at him sweetly from the bed. "I think it's your turn."

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He had been pondering this and asked what Hannah thought of Miriam, after his mother. "We could call her Mimi lor short."

Nodding, Hannah said it was a wonderful-good name. "I like it."

So it was settled, and although he'd hoped for a son this time around with the name Mathias all picked out to honor Oawdi Byler Gid was most grateful Hannah and the baby were all right. Truth be told, he was altogether ready to thank the hex doctor for his time and send him on his way.

Leah was overjoyed at the news, heralded by Gid himself, of the birth of little Mimi Peachey, and by Saturday morning Leah had held Hannah's darling baby several times already. Now she sat in the kitchen near the wood stove with Aunt Lizzie while Dat, Abe, and a group of men headed over to Blackbird Pond for a morning of ice fishing. She had cautioned Dat, privately, to keep his eye on adventuresome Abe, this being the Boy's first such wintertime experience.

"Oh, he'll be just fine," Aunt Lizzie had said when Leah told her of her concern.

"I s'pose I worry too much."

"Jah, but then all mothers do," Lizzie replied with a knowing smile.

She had noticed for some time now that Aunt Lizzie no longer called her "honey-girl," as she had all her growing-up years and beyond. Did she think Leah too old for the nickname? She didn't know and dismissed the thought as they settled into their study of Scripture, reading aloud the entire

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fifty-fourth chapter of the book of Isaiah. When Leah came to the final verse, the one she'd found underlined in Mamma's old Bible, she asked Aunt Lizzie about it. "Do you have any idea why Mamma would have marked this one?"

Lizzie looked down for a time, then, raising her face, she said slowly, "My sister Ida your dear mamma was rebuked harshly by Preacher Yoder, a good many years back." She paused and sighed, her hand at her throat, and then continued. "Your mamma went to speak with Deacon Stoltzfus one day, unbeknownst to any of us "

"Not even Dat?"

"Abram would've put a quick stop to it had he known."

"Why'd Mamma go to speak to the brethren?"

Lizzie put her finger in the Bible to mark the page. "Well, she had oodles of questions. . . passages in the Good Book puzzled her no end."

"Did she share this with you?"

Lizzie nodded. "Oh, we had our talks, just the two of us."

Leah held back a bit, not wanting to push too much. "I hope Mamma got her answers."

Lizzie straightened in her chair and slowly opened the Bible yet again. "That she did . . . and then some."

Leah inhaled deeply and reread the underlined passage. No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn.

According to Aunt Lizzie, Mamma had gone over Dat's head, taking her issues to the preacher, of all things, who apparently admonished her to remain silent. Mamma had been judged for her curiosity. . . no, for her intense hunger for the Lord Jesus, a hunger Leah now shared for "the living Bread" as she read through Mamma's cherished Bible.

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I "The worst of it," Lizzie added, "was that Ida lost her E peace." , ;

"She spoke up?"

I "Talked back . . . kept askin' even more questions, trying In defend herself when she was to be silent," Lizzie explained. j "Not a gut idea, I should say. And for this she was threatened with the shun."

The air went out of Leah and she began to understand more fully Mamma's tremendous pain during Sadie's seemingly endless shunning. When she had composed herself, she noticed a tear roll down Aunt Lizzie's face.

"Sometimes it's ever so hard. ..."

Leah reached out a hand to comfort Lizzie. "Did the preachers succeed in putting the Bann on Mamma?"

"They came close . . . but Abram managed to get the I upper hand with her, at least till all the dust had settled and I the bishop wasn't keeping such a close eye on them." Lizzie I attempted to blink back more tears but failed. I Leah offered her a handkerchief from beneath her own sleeve, feeling sorry for bringing up such a painful topic.

I Leah listened as Lydiann excitedly repeated herself about I "goin' to eat supper at Carl's house tonight." The family was lull bundled up, and both buggy seats were rather full and spillling over, what with Abe on Leah's lap and Lydiann and Sadie I bunched up together so Dat, Aunt Lizzie, and Dawdi John "could squeeze into the front seat.

Quite surprisingly, a handwritten invitation had arrived in I In- mail from Dan and Dottie Nolt on Friday. To Leah's

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further amazement, Dat had instructed her to accept. How all this had come about, she was unsure, although they had been sufficiently warned by Lydiann, hadn't they? Still, Leah found it interesting that Carl had managed

to get his parents to invite Amish folk for a New Year's Eve supper, even with Mary Ruth's help. Leah could only hope they as a family weren't sitting ducks to be influenced toward Mennonite ways. That would not go over whatsoever with Dat.

Suddenly feeling playful, she bounced her knees, and Abe laughed. "Mamma's got awful bony knees," he said as she jostled him.

Dawdi John craned his neck in their direction. "Ya best be thankful you ain't sittin' on my knees, young man."

To this Lydiann let out a giggle. "Oh, Abe ... I say you oughta be glad ya have a place to sit at all. Or maybe you'd rather walk."

"Well, it ain't so far to the Nolts' place," Abe shot back.

"Remember when Abe was a little tyke?" Dat said more to Lizzie than to the rest of them. "I used to balance him and Lydiann both on my knees."

"Oh, I remember," Lydiann said.

Leah had to smile. "I don't think that's quite possible, dear."

"But I do!" Lydiann insisted.

Dawdi John chimed in, "Well, now, ya must be a mighty schmaert one to recall what happened when you was hardly out of diapers."

"Ach, Dawdi!" Lydiann said a bit too loudly.

"Now, Lyddie," Dat scolded over his shoulder.

"Shh," whispered Leah, patting the heavy woolen robe on top of Lydiann's lap.⁸⁹he ^Prodigal

I I ytfi:iiin continued muttering but did not say anything muii1, .iikI Leah was grateful. It wouldn't do to have a lippy Lydl.um on board, not this night. With Dat's word of rebuke, pelu i reigned but for the muted, yet heavy thud of the Hjrui'.1-' hooves against encrusted snow. Sleigh bells

sounded in m\$ distance, joined, as they passed another Amish farmhouse, K
tin' familiar peal of a supper bell.

f When they arrived at the Nolts', Leah noticed Carl was Bun iiij; up against
the front room window, peering out. For a M*p| Ing moment she recalled
her excitement as a girl going to li'.n young Jonas and her other Mast
cousins; then she got Ini nl the enclosed buggy and turned to offer her hand
to l.y.li;mn and Sadie as they stepped down and onto the snow. I 11 i (iok no
time at all for Lydiann to also spot Carl. "Looke line, Mamma," she said,
tugging on Leah's arm. "My best I in id's waitin' for us." With this, she took
off running, emliin.issing Leah thoroughly and, no doubt, Aunt Lizzie, as
well. I I);if, meanwhile, tied the horse to a boulder as Lizzie Id|Til Dawdi
John up the shoveled walkway, both moving (early as slowly as cold
blackstrap molasses.

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Xlis smile contagious, Carl Nolt told each person where to sit at the long
trestle table, which reminded Lydiann of their own at home. When it was
her turn, he led her to the place beside Aunt Lizzie. "Denki," she said, and
he grinned the wayhe had when he was Joseph in the Christmas play,
leaning near baby Jesus as their teacher had prompted him. She couldn't
help but think Carl had a kind face. Like the realJoseph must've had.

When Carl seated himself across the table from Lydiann, she was ever so
glad, because this way she could observe him without much effort. Her
curiosity about his adoption was going to get the best of her sooner or later,
though she didn't quite know how to bring up the topic. What was it like to

be an orphan, anyway? She couldn't imagine it, really, except, of course, she herself could be considered a half orphan, having her sister Leah as a substitute mamma. So, in a way, maybe she did understand Carl's family situation better than she realized. Maybe that was why she liked him as a school chum, although Abe and Carl were also good pals, since the boys

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I'luyi'il Together at recess and ate lunch together at noon.

She wondered if Mary Ruth had taught Carl to read some INmisylvania Dutch, or. . . was it possible his uncle, the one win > enjoyed attending Amish farm sales, had instructed him? II :.i i, maybe that was something she could ask Carl about here In'lnio too long.

.lah, I will, once school starts up again, she decided.

I call, who had been awake since four-thirty that morning, WiiN beginning to tire of table talk come nearly eight o'clock. I ionic Nolt had served supper much later than the Ebersols were used to, though Leah hoped no one suspected how weary >>hc Iclt. She sat straight as she listened intently to the talk U-i ween Dat, Dawdi John, Dr. Schwartz, and Dan Nolt, with iHClisisional remarks from the women, especially Aunt Lizzie ai id Dottie. Leah had not been surprised to see the doctor and I iirnine arrive ten minutes after Dat reined the horse into I be driveway, although the fact that the Schwartzes and Roben were also invited something Lorraine had shared with her Saturday had completely slipped Leah's mind, and she hiuI Tailed to mention it to Dat prior to their coming. Still, I 'ill seemed to be faring well, and he appeared to try to iiu hide Lizzie, seated next to him, in the conversation with i be Nolts, whom he seemed more relaxed talking to than kiihert Schwartz, not surprisingly. Aunt Lizzie, for her part, w.is not at all shy about entering in, seemingly comfortable Hiking about everything from the snowy weather to Dottie's delicious recipe for chicken with mushrooms.

I)r. Schwartz and Dan discussed something they'd read in

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the newspaper about a professional baseball team called the Dodgers and a proposed new stadium for downtown Brooklyn, New York. Leah could merely guess what such an enormous place might look like, having witnessed only their Amish young folk playing baseball or cornerball in meadows at one gathering or another. Meanwhile, she noticed how Sadie's face became drawn, her lips tense, whenever the doctor spoke, and Leah's heart felt especially tender toward her suffering sister.

The talk that most interested her, though, came from Mary Ruth's lips here lately, she and Dottie had spent an entire day making cottage cheese. "And, not to boast, but Dottie caught on real quick," Mary Ruth said, eyes shining with the telling.

"We made butter, too." Dottie nodded, apparently pleased with the end result of their labor.

Aunt Lizzie's face broke into an even wider smile. And Leah thought Lizzie's heart must surely be gladdened by the news that Mary Ruth was passing along some of the Old Ways to Dottie. What a nice thing, Leah thought, wondering if Dat might also be heartened at this domestic talk. But one look at her father made it clear he was now caught up in conversation with Robert, despite Dat's seeming reluctance to approach him at the start of the evening.

How odd for Dat to meet Mary Ruth's beau this way, contemplated Leah. But as the evening wore on, she felt it hadn't been such a bad idea, seeing that Dat and the doctor's elder son were getting along quite well.

She dared not think too hard on that herself, however each time she pondered how truly odd it was for Derek's brother to be sweet on one of Sadie's sisters, she felt a bit ill.

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m think (he same union that had given life to thoughtless fctty had also produced well-mannered Robert. She knew Mfhiiiul what an upstanding young man Robert was, for she'd ud nnipk' opportunity to encounter him while cleaning his BtrtlutTs house.

I: Amidst the comfortable talk of the adults, Leah noticed Will,inn smiling at Carl across from her. But, by the time desi'l whs served, Lydiann's face had become serious, a sharp Bill nisi to her earlier high spirits.

I I rah sighed, wondering what might be bothering her dear I)!. W;is it possible she was dreading the end of a wonderfulIti id evening? After all, the two youngsters were close friends, though she sometimes wondered how Dat felt about Carl's Ifckly visits with Lydiann and Abe and, occasionally, Sadie, well, who had been known to join the children on the floor km i In- wood stove, playing games. Surely Dat wouldn't want I) risk a Mennonite youngster as a close playmate to Lydiann hil A hi-, and she had recently considered recommending to III11 (hut the children not continue attending the one-room tonji'iown School, which met the needs of the growing pin! population of Plain and fancy children alike. Besides, fcrir had been talk amongst the People of building an Amish In loom school in Gobbler's Knob, following the recent liicolidation of public schools. But so far nothing had been Iiiit- io make this happen, although with the divine appoint-

41 ii hilling upon Gid, there might be more interest now, fed;illy if Leah took it upon herself to voice Dat's concern huit Carl, Lydiann, and Abe becoming too friendly.

Sadie's first reaction upon laying nervous eyes on Robert IWiiirCz was of absolute surprise, not because he reminded

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her of Derry, but because in every way he did not. Mary Ruth's beau was nothing at all like the brother she remembered even his mannerisms were unlike those of the dark-haired, dark-eyed boy who'd captured her heart,

only to smash it to pieces. Robert's thoughtful demeanor and the way his eyes genuinely admired her sister were a marked contrast to the almost leering way Derry had always looked at her.

Recalling her youth, she realized anew what a tease she had been, seeking out fancy English boys to flirt with nearly every Friday night. It was no surprise she'd attracted the unwholesome advances of a young man such as Derry.

All that's behind me, Sadie thought, wishing she might have done things differently, yet recognizing her weakness for male attention. She still found it difficult to live without a man, no matter that she was a widow and drawing close to thirty years old.

"It was nice you could finally meet my father," remarked Mary Ruth as she and Robert sat together in the formal parlor. Such a pleasant room it was, with several windows facing north, toward the vast woods, which could readily be seen during daylight hours. Framing the wide doorway, gleaming wood reflected the light of two reading lamps mounted on the wall behind the settee.

All the good-byes had been said, and Mary Ruth had enjoyed the evening immensely, except that her twin and her newly expanded family had stayed snug at home, which was understandable with a newborn in the house.

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H "Vniir (.bid's quite a talker," said Robert. "I wasn't sure

Him! in expect."

H "i)i ice you get acquainted with him, Dat's not one to shy

Itmii '.peaking his mind, that's for sure."

H < Mmm to the window, Robert stood silently.

H "I'Wrything all right?" she asked, getting up to stand near

Bin

"Sure," he said, not convincing her.

H " there's something on your mind."

I As Ik- turned, Robert's eyes seemed to search hers. "I'm

Hjllni!1 in love with you, Mary Ruth."

H I In heart leaped up at his words, but she felt torn, as well.

HJi >l ><i i had yet to learn the terrible truth regarding Sadie and

Heivk, and she felt compelled to reveal the past and the

Hmiliing apprehensions that troubled her at the prospect of

Hi engagement. She must find the courage to share what she

Hid held so close all this time.

H "I care deeply for you, too, Robert," she replied softly.

H\m (here is something you must know, if you don't already."

H "Dear, what is it?" He reached for her hands. "Have I

Him* Something to offend you . . . said something out of

Hmr

He assured him that was not the case and let unfold the history of the day she had seen his younger brother running along Georgetown Road. "He was fit to be tied." "You met Derek?"

She nodded and then continued. "More than once. Your mother and my sister. . . poor Sadie, were . . ." She couldn't help herself to say the word lovers.

Robert was frowning, evidently puzzled. "What is it?" "Sadie had a baby. . . with Derek."

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Robert flinched suddenly and shook his head, as if unable to believe his ears.

"My sister had a wild fling, and she met your brother somehow, somewhere I don't know much about that." She sighed, sickened at the thought of being the one to inform him, for it was obvious he was not aware of this shocking news. "Their baby. . . was stillborn, and Sadie was unrepentant about her relationship with Derek, which, I was told, was the reason she left to go to Ohio. And why she was eventually shunned."

He looked at her as if astounded. "Oh, Mary Ruth, I had no idea."

She was sorry to upset him, yet relieved he apparently believed her.

He squeezed her hand and held it for a moment, staring down. When at last he looked at her, his eyes were intense. "At the very least, I must apologize for Derek's behavior toward Sadie."

She felt grateful for his words. "Please . . . can we keep this private ... just between us?" She had almost hesitated to ask this, but he immediately agreed, and she was rather surprised he didn't inquire of her further, asking if there might have been some misunderstanding ... if another young man

might have been the father of her sister's child. But nothing of the kind was mentioned, and Mary Ruth felt he trusted her implicitly.

Still, neither knew how to handle the fact that a marriage between them would have the unintended consequence of also uniting Derek and Sadie once more, if only as in-laws, serving as a lifetime reminder of their regrettable past.

The evening had taken a much different turn than the

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iiimnntic moment Robert must surely have had in mind for

11 inn. Heart heavy, Mary Ruth accompanied him to the front i h h >r. He kissed her cheek before he slipped out into the cold ihi;Ih. "I'll call you soon, dear."

"Good night," she said, the softly spoken word dear linwring in her mind long after midnight.

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Jonas settled back into his favorite chair by the fire with a copy of The Budget, enjoying the many accounts of Christmas from various towns around Ohio, sometimes even chuckling aloud in the stillness of the kitchen. He read till his eyes were tired, then stood up to put out the gas lamp.

Sitting back down, he took pleasure in the silence as his eyes slowly became accustomed to the darkness. Emma had long since turned in for the

night, having suffered a head cold for a second day. He delighted in recalling the happiness on her sweet face at his gift on Christmas morning the antique vase.

His mind wandered back to the encounter with the aging fellow he'd met at the recent auction, where he had seen and bid on the colorful vase. He found himself wondering if, indeed, he was the person the particular Jonas Mast meant for the old letter, as the elderly gentleman had seemed to indicate. And the more he pondered this, the more he wished he'd spoken up, offered to ride to wherever it was the man was living and see for himself the letter in question.⁹⁹..Prodigal

Not usually curious, he surprised himself by repeating the i-vi'it in his mind. Tired as he was, Jonas did not wish to see the new year in, as groups of young people were sure to be doing this night one group, in fact, just down the long dirt liine that passed the farmhouse. He knew there were couples IniiIding a bonfire on the frozen lake, probably making ready lo roast marshmallows. He and Emma had seen a good many youth gathering there on previous New Year's Eves, and if by rhance some of the boys drank too much moonshine, the immature noises of glee carried well over the lake and down i his way.

Tonight, however, he didn't care to know how many were shivering in the cold or showing off for their sweethearts if indeed they were. He wondered if most were in the middle of rumschpringe and if they would end up joining church sooner i;iiher than later.

For a moment he contemplated the Bann put on him by i he Gobbler's Knob church. It was peculiar that a revered minister would impose such a ruthless punishment, shunning I hose who did not stay put in the church of their baptism . . . not to mention those pursuing a livelihood other than farming. All the same, Jonas knew of several other like-minded brethren here locally, some being ultraconservative Swartzcntruber Amish.

Inhaling deeply, he was grateful that Emma scarcely ever , sought to explore the landscape of his past, though he had responded through the years to any number of questions she'd had about Lancaster County and his family.

Growing weary, Jonas rose to his feet and headed upstairs.

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Leah noticed how bright-eyed Abe was as he sat himself down at the breakfast table New Year's Day, after having helped Dat and Sadie with the milking. Lydiann had remained indoors again to help Leah make cornmeal mush, fried eggs, and bacon, something she was doing more and more at both Dat's and Leah's bidding.

"We oughta have some hot cocoa for breakfast, too," Lydiann said, a mischievous smile on her face. " 'Tis better tasting than coffee."

"But hot chocolate doesn't go well with fresh-squeezed orange juice, do ya think?" Leah asked, standing at the cookstove.

Lydiann shrugged and continued to set the table. "I don't give a care, really."

"Something botherin' my girl?"

"Jah." Lydiann wandered over and stood next to Leah.

Leah was eager to listen, and by not saying more, she got Lyddie to open up and share her heart.

" 'Tween you and me, Mamma, Mary Ruth really annoys me, 'cause she lives over there with the Nolts and not here with us. And she dotes on Carl something awful."

So that's what was troubling her last night. She's jealous of her sister's affection for Carl, Leah decided.

"I thought you and Carl were pals."

"Maybe so, but. . . it's just that. . ." Lydiann hesitated; then she shrugged.

Leah patted Lydiann's arm. "I daresay things'll change as time goes by." She was thinking of how likely it was that Mary Ruth would settle down and

marry, and once that happened, their sister wouldn't be so connected to the Nolts especially

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jin Curl, which was apparently the crux of Lydiann's corn-

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j "Whai if Mary Ruth likes Carl better than me?" Lydiann

I mi.Ulot11 y burst out, tears pooling in her eyes.

I "Adi, Lyddie, come here." She held out her arms to hold

l]iri" i;iil ;md drew her near. "There, there . . . you mustn't fret

I |nt\v. You've got Abe and me . . . and Dat, too." She named

loll Amu Lizzie and Dawdi John, as well. "And you've got

iHiulli1," Leah added. "You and your eldest sister have become

li|iillf dose in a short time."

I I ydiiinn dried her eyes and sat on the long bench on the

pern side of the table. "But what if Sadie leaves again?" she

piskc'il. "Why'd she live somewhere else anyway. . . all those

Wfitrsi""

I "I k-r husband lived in Indiana you know that."

I "No ... I mean before she was married. How come she

It mini up out west, 'stead of livin' here in Gobbler's Knob?"

I "Perhaps someday you'll know. . . when you're older."

I A strained silence fell over the kitchen and was abruptly
(broken when Dat pushed in through the back door, clunking
Itlisiilc wearing his work boots. Sadie was right behind him,
lclu'd<s as red as cherry tomatoes.

I Leah rose to welcome them. "Come wash up ... breakfast
lilt nice 'n' hot." She motioned for Lydiann to scoot over and
ll at her usual place, aware of the brooding look on the girl's
pice, Lyddie's sullenness mustn't get the best of her, thought Leah,
Ib tping to find a way to nip it in the bud.

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Leah felt in the pit of her stomach that something was amiss, even before
Dat and Gid came in the house midmorning to warm up awhile, eager for
some hot coffee and freshly baked chocolate-chip cookies. Her dread
deepened when Dat and Gid both said they hadn't seen hide nor hair of Abe.

"Not since immediately following breakfast," Dat said.

"We thought he'd run an errand for you over to my mamma, maybe," Gid
said.

Upon hearing this, Leah headed straight for her woolen shawl.

Dat's hand on her arm interrupted her. "I'll go 'n' look for him," he said.
"You stay here with the family. . . in case he comes home a-hankerin' for
some hot cocoa and cookies."

She let go of her shawl and stood with her back against the hard wall, watching her father shove his big feet into mud-caked work boots. With not a sigh or a word of goodbye, he reached for his heavy coat and scarf and stepped out the back door.

He's worried, now, became I am, she thought. Dat could read her, so to speak, from all the years they'd worked side by side in the barn and the fields, no doubt. He knew how she thought, and when moments like this arose, he trusted her instincts. Something was terribly wrong, and now Dat knew it, too. ∴> .

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/ \hriim inhaled deeply through his nose lest he chill his

I'lngg as he tramped through the frozen pastureland toward M I,. hurm cornfield and eventually Smitty's wide meadow. ! I In' p;ill he cut through the ice and snow made a direct line

11 i his house to the Peacheys' back door, where he chose to

j i<'M, since Miriam somehow observed most everything that

ni on from the many windows in her kitchen. When she

I c' lo the door and welcomed him inside, she asked right

j mi .iy il he was looking for Abe. He assured her that he was. "Well, I saw him head out to the pond," and here she

I'l'iniwl and raised her chin a bit, staring hard in the direction ji i Uluckbird Pond, where they'd gone ice fishing three days

1 "I low long ago?"

"Oh, it's been some time." Miriam wore a sudden frown. ' \ j;ihkI two hours or more, I'd have to say."

A tremor of foreboding caught Abram off guard, and he immediately and swiftly headed down the steps, waving his hand in farewell without looking back.

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Two hours . . . in this cold?

He could not imagine what Abe might be doing out in this frigid weather, and he quickened his pace.

Lorraine Schwartz had been rather astonished at how much her husband had seemingly enjoyed himself at the Nolts' house last evening. When Henry had first met the Ebersols there, she'd noticed that he was somewhat standoffish, yet as the ice was broken and people began passing the food, eating and talking, he relaxed and entered into conversation with Abram, who was quite an interesting fellow, Lorraine thought. She had also noticed her husband discreetly studying Sadie, whom Lorraine had recognized with a jolt, to be sure, recalling the urgent look on Sadie's young face when she had unexpectedly come calling for Derek years ago.

Something else had caught Lorraine's interest last evening. It was the way Henry spoke to young Carl Nolt his gestures, the softness in his voice. She couldn't help but notice the camaraderie between them and wondered how it was that Carl, healthy as he had always been, would have connected so well with Henry on so few clinic visits. Yet Henry was undeniably playful and easily succeeded in drawing out the young boy. Henry will be a wonderful grandfather someday, she thought with a smile.

Presently making her way to the kitchen, the recollection of the supper next door caused her to wish the whole group of them might enjoy yet another opportunity to dine together. Perhaps at Robert's wedding . . . if Robert can indeed win Mary Ruth's heart.

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She would not hold her breath on that matter, however, but Mary Ruth gave the distinct impression she was holding back. Lorraine didn't mind if Robert took his time wooing the funner Amish girl, for she was fond of both Mary Ruth and her older sister Leah. Each of the Ebersol girls was sweet in her own unique way, although the pained, sad eyes of their filler sister, Sadie, caused Lorraine to wonder just what the limililul girl had ever wanted with Derek that distant night, Wnlling for hours on their front steps for his return home.

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"Abe . . . no!" Abram gasped, sucking cold air into his tinijlj.s as he stooped down. There before him lay his son faceil"\vn on the ice of Blackbird Pond. He called to him and

11- -lled him over, patting his face at first, and then slapped him

11H ii- quick smack, becoming even more alarmed when Abe did K respond. Not even an eyelid flickered. , M"Abe!" he hollered. '"/;/'-.V'.

^Hol'll no response.

Wm Abram panicked and, not wasting another moment, he lirooped his limp child into his arms and carried him back to [tile Peacheys' house. Somehow or other Abe had been Ik nocked out cold, and the fierceness of the winter weather digressed Abram as he pounded his fist on Smitty's storm Illnor.

I This time the blacksmith himself came and opened the Id* >r, his eyes growing round when he spied unconscious Abe. I"/ limmel, come in, Abram, come in."

I "He was all sprawled out on the ice," Abram said, a catch in i liis voice as both Smitty and Miriam gathered near.

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"Lay him out on the rug here, close to the wood stove," Smitty offered.

Miriam knelt beside Abe, touching his hair and face. "Ach, he's ice-cold."

Abram's heart caught in his throat and he realized he was petrified with fear. As gently as he could, he removed the boy's shoes and socks to check for frostbite, noticing immediately the telltale signs of hard and shiny grayish skin.

"We best not be warmin' him too quickly," advised Miriam, hovering near Abe and wearing a worried frown.

Abram made an attempt to keep his emotions in check, but the strange chalky pallor of his boy's face caused him grave concern. He shook Abe and called to him, "Can ya hear me, son? Wake up!" but to no avail.

"I best be ridin' for the hex doctor," Smitty said, resting his big hand on Abram's shoulder.

The smithy turned and was heading toward the back door to begin the process of hitching up when Miriam let out a moan. She shook her head and was weeping, which brought the smithy back into the kitchen. "Why must ya first think of powwowin'?" she asked. "Why not call for a real doctor Dr. Schwartz, not but a mile down the way? He's ever so much closer, ain't so?"

"Ach, Miriam, can't ya see Abe's in trouble here? There's no sense callin' for Dr. Schwartz when what the boy needs is the Amish doctor," Smitty replied, his brow creased with a deep frown.

Abram struggled greatly, going back and forth in his mind, knowing full well the time might be short. M51 boy could bedying, he thought. M;y only son ... I can't let what happened to dear Ida befall my Abe. : . : < .

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I Always before he'd decided for the powwow doctor it Lhm ilk- best way, the method that made the most sense to him.

I Ihii what would Ida want me to do? She sacrificed her lifemvinji birth to our boy. He labored over this, feeling the burden u Ncconds ticked away. He must hurry and do something . . . Ihlnk on it later.

I Yet he knew the answer knew it in his innards for not Wily bad his devout wife made her wishes known in her wholehearted disapproval of the powwow doctors, she'd also Mil lu-r legacy of beliefs in the form of her own Bible, marked lip almost to the point of irreverence. Abram knew this as well as anybody, because, for the past several months, he had If en reading every New Testament Scripture Ida had underIll ml on healing and other issues.

I Smitty stepped out to the utility room within Abram's ll^hl and pulled an additional woolen scarf off the wooden If I,'. "Well, who's it gonna be? Dr. Schwartz or the hex doctor? By I he looks of Abe all conked out like that..." Smitty's lokv faded.

I Abram could #jst imagine Lizzie having her say if word got In her ears about this, and even though he had always put his Iriisl in the sympathy healers, all of a sudden he experienced I Miong desire to please Lizzie, as well as his beloved Ida. I With a conviction that surprised him, he made his choice. IRide to Dr. Schwartz, and make it quick!" I Miriam sighed, obviously relieved. Then, as if in prayer, My closed her eyes while Smitty rushed out the back door. I Watching Miriam kneeling there beside Abe, he wished lizzie were here with him, too, for though she had a regular ildency to share her opinions a bit too freely, she might

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know what to do for Abe's frostbite at least that. And she was as encouraging as the day was long, which would be of help to Abram at this terrible moment.

Now that Smitty was gone, he hoped against hope he had done the right thing. This being New Year's Day, what chance was there of the doctor being home? A niggling fear crept in at the back of his mind.

He continued to sit cross-legged on the floor next to Abe as worrisome thoughts nagged him. When he thought he might lose the ability to keep his chin from quivering, Leah startled him by flying in the back door.

"Dat . . . what on earth!" Immediately she slid to her knees beside Miriam, close to her little brother lying on the floor ... in truth, her son. "Oh, Abe . . . Abe." Then to Abram she asked, "Whatever happened? Where did ya find him?"

"He must've gone walking out on the pond and tripped . . . fell forward, hitting his head. When I found him, he was knocked clean out. . . near frozen, too." Abram could hardly manage that much.

"Splash some water on him, maybe," Leah suggested, and they tried that, but Abe lay still as death, his breath mighty shallow.

Will he ever open his eyes again? Abram held his own breath, steeling himself against the worst.

Leah was now holding Abe's small hand in her own, cradling it as she took his pulse, glancing up at the round day clock, high on the kitchen wall. "Seems a mite too slow," she whispered, eyes locking on Abram. "Where's Smitty?"

"Gone for Dr. Schwartz," Miriam answered quickly as she reached an arm around Leah and pulled her near.

Mil's iliniili weighed heavily on Abram's mind after
levin Inii),: years, images of that night were still vivid: the
hliihril, siul lone of the midwife; Leah's ashen face and the
V^iyy klip IiiuI lield Ida's wrist so gently, taking her pulse just as
Ijllir WHH iliis minute lovingly caring for Abe. "Dr. Schwartz'll
nt Iwi'c in no time," he heard himself say for Leah's benefit.
i'Wo enn't lose hope."

"Oh, my sweet, precious Abe," cried Leah, putting her (tii ncxl to his now.
"I love ya so . . ." Her soft crying shook Ivi Nlituuilders.

Plrtclng his hand on Abe's ankle, too aware of the stiffness, j'1-1 tin
wrestled to bring to memory one or two Scripture i i i-N (hat dealt with
troublesome times so many there |i> M- hut why couldn't he recall a single
one? And why was m I (In ;il ways seemed to have had a fitting verse on
the tip of to tongue for nearly every occasion?

^H|dn had ignored the brethren in all of that, he thought. She

^^w/u disobeyed by studying the Bible, even memorized certain

^Hp, because she couldn't keep herself from it, as she'd always

Hp, Her yearning had caused her grief for Abram, too but

Mpftt'hovtteor other she'd managed to keep from having the

Biinn put on her by the bishop, maybe because Ida agreed to

1<> i-|i her opinions on Scripture to herself. Although, in the

iiil, his wife had felt comfortable enough to keep sharing her

i- ws on the Bible with him, for she had known him all too

V' II. Never, ever would he have turned her in to the bishop

ii .my of the brethren. His love for Ida had been stronger

Lin his devotion to Bontrager or to the church.

IAi last the words of the psalmist David crept into his iiiiuI: f le shall call upon me, and 1 will answer him: I will be with i/im in trouble; I will deliver him, and honour him.

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Reaching now for Abe's other hand, Abram clutched it between his own rough and callused hand and closed his eyes right along with Miriam and Leah.

O Lord God and heavenly Father, hear my desperate prayer. ... ,

Leah was astonished to see her father's head bowed as they waited for Smitty to return. Silently, she joined him with a prayer of her own. Lord, please allow Abe, our dear boy, to live ... let him open his eyes and suffer no lingering ill effects from this nasty fall, she prayed. I trust your grace and mercy, Lord, your many kindnesses to us.

The prayer was the best she knew to offer, and she wished either Aunt Lizzie who'd remained at home with Dawdi John or Mary Ruth were on hand to offer a spoken prayer of faith. She certainly didn't feel comfortable beseeching the Lord almighty out loud herself, and her heart fell as she again looked at Abe's stony white face.

Sighing deeply, she felt as if her own heart might stop beating if Abe did not soon blink his shining eyes open or twitch one of his childish fingers. Anything at all.

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Abe

/"Ybe Ebersol, seven years old," the young nurse repeated, writing Abe's vital information on her clipboard. "Date of birth?" .. . ,

Leah replied quickly, "December 27, 1949." \

"Does he have any allergies?"

"None that I know of." Leah glanced over at Dat, who was sitting, slumped in a heap, on one of only two chairs in the semiprivate hospital room. Her father was unable to be of much b^elp after his ride in Dr. Schwartz's front seat, where he'd stiffly braced himself for dear life while Leah and Aunt Lizzie sat in the backseat with unresponsive Abe stretched out between them. Drawn by her growing concern, Lizzie had shown up at the Peachey's just before Dr. Schwartz's arrival, and by the look on Dat's face, he was ever so grateful to have her here.

Dat was distraught beyond anything Leah could recall in recent years, and she felt terribly sorry for him. Goodness, he hadn't ridden in the front seat of an automobile much at all, and never at such a high speed.

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As soon as the nurse left the room, having tended to a doctor-ordered oxygen tent for Abe, Aunt Lizzie said, "He'll be comin' to ... here 'fore long." But her voice trembled, and Leah noticed Dat glance up at Lizzie, his eyes softening.

"Jah, I daresay he will." Leah retuned her gaze to poor Abe, lying as quiet and motionless as can be. Oh, how small a boy he was, even though he'd grown out of nearly all his school pants lately. She'd teased him just last week that he was shooting Up like a Weed, "and much too fast at that." At this moment, as unchecked tears rolled down her cheeks, she promised herself she would never, ever again grumble about such things, even in jest.

"Let's talk in Dutch," Dat said suddenly, getting up and leaning on the bed rail closer to Abe.

"A wonderful-gut idea." Lizzie rose to join him.

Softly they reminded Abe of their love for him. Aunt Lizzie even spoke of the day the men had all gone ice fishing and what fun he'd had' and of the fish fry they'd enjoyed that evening. All the while the nurse came in and out of the room to check the boy's vital signs.

Not long after Dat and Aunt Lizzie had slipped out to the waiting room for some water, Leah turned to see Gid and Hannah coming in the door, babe in arms. "Oh, Hannah . . . Gid!" She ran to her sister and buried her face in Hannah's neck.

"We carrve as soon as we could get Ida Mae and Katie Ann settled in with my folks," Gid explained, saying Sadie had remained with both Lydiann and Dawdi John.

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When Leah had composed herself, she took Mimi from Hmuuih and saw
Gid reach for Hannah's hand. Together, they JVení and stood at Abe's
bedside; he had been wrapped in sevfrnl warm blankets in an attempt to
slowly raise his body temperature, which was low due to prolonged
exposure to the elements, The hospital staff had also surrounded his head
with "" *ygen tent and was watching him closely for signs of a h;iin
concussion.

"Does anybody know what happened?" Hannah whis|-red. "Did he slip and
fall?"

t-rid reached around her and drew her near as Hannah k'Kan to sob in his
arms. "Dear. . . dear," he said.

Ach, this is just what I saw in my dream," she cried, and (iid, trying his best
to soothe her, suggested they join Dat and lizzie in the waiting area.

This left Leah alone with Abe and the tiny infant asleep In her arms. Her
heart went out to Hannah, who seemed tertiUy fragile today, both
physically and emotionally, likely I""""> having given birth so recently. The
shock of Abe's accil'l'nl had no domht set her back even more.

flipping quietly to Abe's side, Leah began to sing the song Mamma had
taught her so long ago: "Jesus loves me, this I know ... for the Bible tells
me so."

1 he baby in her arms stirred slightly, and she leaned her iiicc near to sing to
sweet and tiny Mimi, too. " 'Little ones to I Inn belong . . .'" With each
precious word, she realized that those dear ones did, in fact, belong to God,
and she was suddenly too overcome to continue singing.

Instead, she found Abe's hand and touched it lightly, hopI Intf she might
feel a hint of a stir. Anything to give her hope.

Lu Be

After a while Hannah and Gid returned to the hospital room to get Mimi. They visited with Leah a bit longer, although Leah could see in Hannah's eyes that she wasn't ready to come to town just yet, especially under such distressing circumstances.

Soon Gid looked tenderly at Hannah before nodding his good-bye. "God be with you, Leah," he said, and they turned and waved, leaving the room again nearly as fast as they'd returned.

There was little time between clusters of visits, and Dan and Dottie Nolt arrived soon after with Mary Ruth. Dottie told Leah that Carl had wanted desperately to come, but they'd asked Lorraine Schwartz to look after him because he was under twelve and wouldn't be allowed upstairs to the room anyway. "It was Lorraine who came running over to our house to announce the sad news, asking us to pray for Abe."

Leah clung to Mary Ruth's hand as she listened, ever so glad to see her. "I was hopin' you'd hear somehow and come."

"All during the ride here ... we were praying," Mary Ruth said of the three of them.

"Denki, oh, thank you," Leah told Dottie, accepting a concerned embrace.

Meanwhile, Dan excused himself to go in search of Dat and Aunt Lizzie, after Leah explained how distressed her father had been earlier. "He's having the hardest time seein' Abe like this. We all are, truly." She stopped, not wanting to go on so for fear Abe in his stupor might hear them talking.

Mary Ruth nodded. "Dan will do Dat some good," she

114 115MHid, offering a brave smile even in the midst of her tears.

II A hush fell over the room, apart from the periodic swoosh

Wkf I he oxygen tent, and Leah and Mary Ruth moved to the

301 of Abe's bed. "Let's pray for him together," her sister whispered.

Leah could not speak for the lump in her throat as she Rarely nodded.

Her Mary Ruth began as if she were humbly addressing a dear Kid close friend, and as her sister raised her petition to the

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throne of Grace, Leah whispered her own prayer. "Dear Lord, Thank you for sending Mary Ruth here today. ..."

I "

With Repeatedly Sadie had tried to console Lydiann, who was still crying upstairs in her bedroom. She had managed to get Lydiann to lie down the poor girl was emotionally worn out over Abe's accident.

Her Downstairs, Sadie paced from the kitchen all the way to the front room and back again, wishing for some word on her brother. Anything at all would help to alleviate her pent-up feelings. She was all too familiar with such frustration, having suffered similarly for hours on the day the startling report of Harvey's fatal accident had come, unable to get to the hospital until too late to say her good-byes to her darling.

The Indiana bishop had been on hand during that dark, still time, and she wondered again why the bishop here couldn't be more compassionate to her ... or even encouraging. Clenching her jaw, she recalled how she'd felt upon receiving the harsh letter Bishop Bontrager had sent in response to her request to return home. He had pointedly stated she was a "most vile woman in need of repentance,"

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and he even hinted that he doubted she would have contacted him if not for her widowhood. He had also dared to suggest her husband's untimely death showed she was most likely under God's judgment.

Sadie wondered if she could ever truly forgive the bishop for those words and what he'd forced upon her, yet she had no choice but to walk in obedience to the Ordnung lest she fail her second Proving time and be cast out of her father's house.

Truly, she wanted to be found worthy to live amongst the People, and she didn't see herself remaining under Dat's covering for the rest of her life. Although it was much too early for her to think about such things, she hoped to have the chance to marry again someday, perhaps to a widower, once she was past her grieving for Harvey. After all, she had been happiest when married, and happiness was her ambition in life, regardless of Bishop Bontrager's frequent insistence in his sermons that obedience to the church is the highest calling for God's children. "Obey or die" the words had both discouraged her and, at times, kept her on the straight and narrow, even finding their way into the core of her late-night dreams. And she couldn't help but recall the teachings of the upstanding Ohio bishop she had known back when she was staying with the Mellingers. Oh, the remarkable wisdom of the ministers of Millersburg! She knew she ought not let the encouragement of Scripture go unheeded.

Aware of a voice in the Dawdi Haus, she headed through the adjoining door and found her grandfather alone, talking to himself. "Dawdi?" she said so as not to startle him, bending low beside his chair. "Are you all right?"

He lifted his tear-streaked face. "I can hardly stand to

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think 'bout what happened to that young'un," he said, voice
Invoking- "Abe's a right fine boy, he is. Just don't understand
why He thought he was doin' going to Blackbird Pond like
this."

She rose and pulled up a chair to sit near her grandfather.

"I know it's awful hard on all of us, but we daresn't give
up hope."

He nodded slowly, though it seemed with great effort.

"I lint there boy's the apple of your father's eye. He's every-
thing to Abram."

"A son is ever so precious to his father." And to his mother,

she pondered, having to look away and collect herself a bit. "I daresay the
family will still be away at the hospital

in no supertime." He was obviously anxious for some word,

Just as she was.

Sadie offered to make him some coffee, but Dawdi shook

his head.

Making an effort to help him get his mind off young Abe, she picked up
The Budget and began to read from its pages. How humorous stories from
Sugar Creek, Ohio, got Dawdi quieted down. After all, it wouldn't do to have
both Lydiann and Iphigene crying buckets of tears over Abe. What good
would it be if Sadie herself had shed too many fruitless tears over things
she could not change.

I But there were some things that could be altered, and she If I u night again of the letter that had come out of nowhere, as

1(1 I he Lord God had dropped it into her lap to see if she might pel willy do the right thing at long last. Of course, she still had |n< i idea how poor Leah would react.

I It was after she finished reading to Dawdi that Sadie llcvidcd she could no longer wait to fess up to Leah. She must

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come clean once and for all as soon as Abe was home and feeling better.

It was decided Leah would stay the night in the hospital with Abe, and both she and Aunt Lizzie were now talking this over in the family waiting area while Dat went into Abe's room to sit with him. Her father was still berating himself for having introduced Abe to ice fishing not but a few days ago. "Dat needs his own bed and a nice hot meal besides," Leah said, to which Lizzie agreed.

"I daresay word'll get out quickly enough," Aunt Lizzie said, "and you'll have plenty of visitors here with ya tonight, dear one."

Leah knew this to be true, for Plain relatives and friends often gathered around a family during such times of crisis. She wasn't hesitant to be here alone, though. No, she worried more about what she would do if Abe should take a turn for the worse.

"Lydiann will be awful glad to see you and Dat come home." Leah rose. "Dawdi will be, too."

"And Sadie will have supper on by now." Aunt Lizzie looked up at the clock. "I best be gettin' Abram thinking 'bout headin' home." She went to Leah and slipped her arm through hers. "Are ya sure you'll be all right here?"

She couldn't say outright that she would be, but then again she couldn't openly speak of her fears. "Don't worry over me. Look after Dat. . . get him home for now."

Lizzie nodded, smiling sweetly. "All right, then." And they walked arm in arm down the hall to Abe's room.

Dat was coming out, a look of sadness on his face as they approached him. "Abe's still passed out."

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"We must leave him in God's hands," offered Lizzie.

"Easier said than done," Dat replied. "I just hope I did the right thing. . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Whatever do you mean, Dat?"

"By having Smitty get Dr. Schwartz . . . bringing Abe here."

"You did just what Mamma would've wanted," Leah replied.

"Lizzie here would've chewed me out but gut, otherwise," Abram admitted with a fleeting smile. "But that's all right, I guess. She's had her say-so in the past, just as Ida often did."

Dat's acceptance of Lizzie's aversion to hex doctors seemed related in some way to his possible romantic interest. Leah had noticed Lizzie patting Dat's hand today, and just now she felt strongly that if Dat was falling for Lizzie after being a widower for this long, then so be it. Leah found the prospects quite interesting, even promising, since Aunt Lizzie had most likely given up on ever being married.

Grateful for the help and heartening Lizzie had offered this day, she hugged her good-bye and waved to Dat as they made their way*down the hallway together. Thoughtfully she watched them for a moment before heading back to spend the rest of the night with Abe.

Settling into a chair, she suddenly felt alone and downright melancholy. With Dat and Aunt Lizzie gone, she was the sole caretaker of Mamma's son, who was presently sleeping so soundly inside his oxygen tent, he scarcely moved.

She must have dozed off, although for how long Leah

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didn't know, till she became aware of a sound in the room and assumed it was the night nurse. She blinked her eyes open to see Abe's eyes opening, too.

"Mamma . . ." he said faintly.

Her heart sped up and she rushed to his side. "Oh, Abe . . . you're awake!"

"Mamma," he whispered again, smiling weakly now.

"Jah, I'm here, dearest boy."

He lifted his hand to meet hers.

"You're better, ain't so?" She wished Dat and Aunt Lizzie were here for this wonderful moment.

Abe tried to sit up but began to moan, putting his free hand to his forehead. "Ach, my head hurts somethin' awful."

"Well, now, sure it does," she said, encouraging him to lie still. "Ya smacked it a gut one on the ice."

He frowned. "I don't remember any such thing. When was this?"

She was quick to tell him he'd conked his head hard, knocking out the memory of his being at Blackbird Pond earlier today.

"No . . . no, I was never there today. . . not since Dat and all went ice fishin'. Why would I be goin' over there alone, anyways?"

Leah's throat went dry and she became anxious, afraid Abe's accident might have caused mental damage. "Try to rest quietlike while I go 'n' get the nurse. I'll be right back."

She returned alone and hovered near him, eager for the nurse to observe him and to help her understand what was causing Abe to talk so.

Promptly her dear boy closed his eyes again, and for a

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moment he lay there as still as he had before awakening minutes ago. She felt a strange sensation in the pit of her stomach something akin to fear.

She stood there beside Abe's bed, helpless to do anything I nit watch him breathe, when at last the nurse hurried in the door. Leah told of Abe's having come to, and the nurse seemed quite pleased, then touched his arm to awaken him again to take his temperature, pulse, and blood pressure.

When Abe complained more loudly about his headache and a ringing in his ears, the nurse said she would get him some pain medication. She rushed out of the room and returned quickly with a pill and a glass of cold water. "This will make you feel much better."

"Denki," said Abe softly.

Leah got the courage to speak up and say that Abe did not seem to remember having fallen, and the nurse explained that it was normal following a grade-three concussion. "A grade three is determined by a loss of consciousness, and symptoms can continue for a full month or longer," the nurse clarified.

"Do ya me n to say Abe might have to miss school for that long?" Leah asked.

"He'll need bed rest for several weeks, at least. I wouldn't rush him back to school, no." The nurse listed a number of other possible symptoms memory loss, severe headaches, nausea, slurred speech, vision disturbance, fatigue, and more. She went on to mention that Abe would probably require a follow-up exam in two weeks.

When the sound of the nurse's footsteps faded, Leah sat back in the chair. For now her mind was more at ease.

"You'll stay with me tonight, Mamma?" Abe asked.

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She moved her chair next to his bed. "I'll sit beside you all the night through."

In the dim light, she silently began to count her blessings, as well as Abe's. Her boy was alive, able to talk, hear, and see. Thank you, dear Lord, she prayed, keeping a watchful eye on her sleeping little brother the son of her heart.

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JTTannah finished nursing tiny Mimi and placed her gently on her shoulder till several soft burps escaped the infant's rosy mouth. Then she wrapped Mimi securely in soft blankets and placed her snugly in the cradle handmade by Dawdi Mathias Kiack when Hannah was expecting Ida Mae. Just as dear Mamma had often done, Hannah looked in on the older girls,

K)oth soundly sleeping, before tiptoeing to the window of the Ipedroom she and her husband shared.

' This room, vshich she had enjoyed setting up when she and Gid had first moved into Aunt Lizzie's former home as newlyweds, was altogether comforting in the partial light. Aware of the stillness, she watched as the moon ascended gradually over the faraway hills to the east, wishing Gid would hurry back home. He'd gone down to the Ebersol Cottage on foot after they'd stopped to retrieve Ida Mae and Katie Ann from his parents' house, following the brief hospital visit.

Longingly she watched the candle-lit windows on the main floor of her father's house, particularly the golden light from the kitchen, which shone most brightly. They're all

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gathered near the wood stove. . . . She could just imagine her family together, Dat and Aunt Lizzie having arrived home a short while before, and Dawdi John, Sadie, and Lydiann hungry for word about Abe. Gid, too, was keenly interested in hearing how young Abe was doing, as well as finding out why Abram hadn't called for the hex doctor, as he'd heard his father had suggested.

She recalled Aunt Lizzie telling her that such practices had the power to hinder one's walk with the Lord God, thus hampering the hope of salvation. Truth be known, she didn't so much care for her aunt's take on spiritual things and knew she'd never embrace Lizzie's outspoken faith, nor Mary Ruth's, for that matter. Such boldness went against the Old Ways, she was sure, but she dared not discuss such a touchy subject with her husband, instead writing down her thoughts in her journal as she had been doing for a good many years.

Tonight, however, she had scarcely the energy to stand at the window, feeling dismal and left out here at home with her little ones, missing the current news from Dat and AuntLizzie. ...; " ' -..

Is Abe going to live? ,

She fought back the tears, fairly certain Leah had stayed behind at the hospital, knowing her sister as she did. Ever so strong . . . and altogether calm in the midst of such a trying time, that was Leah. It had also been so after Mamma's death.

Hannah sighed, recognizing again her lack of similar fortitude. She couldn't have done what Leah had done ... or what she continued to do, giving up all opportunities to wed. But now, thinking on that, Hannah was altogether happy Leah had broken up with Gid, so to speak, although she knew from his mouth that, when all was said and done, he had been

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lilt1 cause of their breakup. And rightly so, since he longed for pi own household and flesh-and-blood children, which he bun certainly having with Hannah one after another. Yet, Bill* fur, she had failed to give him a son. I Maybe next time the Lord God will see fit to give us a boy, he I In night, moving away from the window and heading to Bpil. I 11'i" ears would have to wait till morning for some word nil Alv. She was just too tired, and not long from now, in a few hours, Mimi would be crying yet again for nourishment. I A lamiliar dread of darkness overwhelmed her as it L'emrd to nearly every night, and Hannah went again to llii'i k on her children, ever worried that they might sleep too Inuiully, never to awaken. Even with her baby safely born, the liiiwlng fear of death seemed to shadow her every move.

I The evening progressed, bringing with it a steady trickle

II visitors to the waiting area Uncle Jesse Ebersol and nearly

in his family and Leah was especially glad to see Adah Imuhir those Svho had come to keep her company through the in iless hours.

I "Ya mustn't wear yourself out," Adah advised sweetly, her lly eyes revealing the concern of a best friend. "Will ya prompt- you'll rest when ya can?" I I ciih's lip quivered and she said she would. I "Phis too shall pass," Adah offered, sitting beside her. "A It'iu ussion is a worrisome thing, but I have a feelin' you'll see Ilin up and goin' about his work and school in no time." I I eah opened her heart and shared what the nurses had id I her to expect about Abe's condition if things went

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normally. To this Adah frowned, yet she stood her ground. "Trust the Lord God for healing," she whispered, glancing around her lest she be heard and misunderstood.

A bit surprised at this, Leah kept her voice low, saying she had been doing just that, but she was awful glad for Adah's encouragement. "I felt I nearly lost my own son this day," she admitted. "And Dat, oh goodness, you best be prayin' for him, too. He needs it as much as Abe, I'm thinkin'."

Saying she would remember the whole family in her prayers, Adah gripped Leah's hand and added, "Nothin's impossible with the Lord God. Ya have to hold on to that."

When all of this recent faith had sprung up in Adah, Leah didn't know. But she wasn't too surprised to hear such things from Miriam Peachey's daughter, knowing what she did about Mammals good friend and the way she believed, though quite secretly, in the saving grace of the Lord Jesus. Like Miriam and Adah, a growing number of the People seemed to be embracing the blessing of prayer.

Come ten o'clock, the family waiting room grew empty and quiet, and soon Leah was alone with Abe once again. She was distressed that he seemed disoriented at times, as though he had lost his way in his mind and could not get back to where he belonged. The nurse had talked about accidentrelated amnesia, something that should fade with time, and hopefully that would be the case with Abe. For now, though, Abe continued to complain about a growing list of symptoms. At first light tomorrow some tests would be done, the nurses assured her. , ". ,\ . ?

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Leah settled into the oversized leather chair, aware of A he's steady breathing. Tomorrow we'll know more. She wrestlxl with the thought, hoping the doctor would indeed have more for her to go on, something to help her grasp all the UtrunKc things happening with Abe.

I A horrendous thirst awakened Abram in the night a

I1 ii iwrrhil urge to get out of bed and go to the kitchen for some I wiiu-r. Along with the intense craving was the lingering memliny i >l a nightmare. In his dream, Abram had made repeated I HI tempts to reach Abe, yet he had slipped on the ice himself, I his aims stretched out before him, unable to save his son.

I A i tempting to recover from the dreadful sense of helplessness, Abram drank the glass dry in one continuous gulp. The Itvenls of the day played in his mind as he padded back to his Iprilroom, and all he could think of now was that Abe and ILt'iilh were far removed from him this night. . . nearly an hour Ifwuy by horse and carriage. He was beholden to Henry Ifirhwartz, the k4ndhearted doctor who had probably saved Abe's life. Once Dr. Schwartz had arrived and Abram had carIfli'd his unconscious son out to the doctor's car, he'd clung to Itt measure of hope that Abe was going to be all right in the llnii|.; run and without the help of the hex doctor. I But presently, in the dimness of his room, he prayed lleiitly that he'd made the right decision for his son ... for ILmh, too, who was tending to Abe with her heart, no doubt Piling precious little sleep herself. Time would tell, Abram Iircw. ...-; r,-v -;:::,

I Such a day it's been, he thought, , :v

In time Abram yielded to slumber and was disturbed by yet another dream. Abe had slipped into a hole in a pond created for ice fishing, his small hands thrashing about, his weak voice calling for help as he slipped farther and farther from the opening, at last bumping his head against the frozen pond above him and drowning in the frigid waters.

Breaking out in a cold sweat, Abram awakened, wishing for the dawn. He arose again and sat on the edge of his bed, struggling to control his yearning to see with his own eyes that Abe still lived.

I should've stayed at the hospital. \ ::

Going to get another drink, he stood at the kitchen window and looked out across the snowy pastureland, this plot of land owned by his own father and grandfather before him. Had either of them ever spoken to the Almighty the way Lizzie did . . . the way Ida had always done? The way he'd silently prayed at his injured son's side?

Again he felt a nudging within to call on the name of the almighty One, if only in a whisper. Inhaling deeply, he began. "O Lord God and heavenly Father, will you hear and honor this prayer I make? Will you look after young Abe this night. . . and Leah, too? Will you shine your light of love kindly upon them while they are so far away from my care? Amen."

He felt altogether odd about the act, yet there was something truly strengthening about speaking this way in prayer. He had never done so before in his life, having been instructed against it, and the actual doing was such an eyeopener, he wondered why on earth Bishop Bontrager was so opposed to something so powerful something as potent as some of the People viewed a hex doctor's chanting.

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I \\\ even more than the sense of power in the room was It' prevailing peace, an assurance that Abe would indeed surlive.

"Father in heaven, hear my prayers for young Abe," whispered Mary Ruth as she walked the length of her bedroom, lit only the light of the moon to guide her way. "Touch my little T and Sadie and Lydiann . . . and Dawdi John, too, with Your saving grace. Minister your abiding strength to Aunt Uzie and Leah, and call Hannah, my dear twin, and her hus--

and her children, and their little ones to the eternal truth of your Word. These things I pray in the name of the Lord Jesus, Amen."

"O Lord God, let Abe live," Sadie prayed silently beneath the coverlet of the bed she normally shared with Leah. "Let Bung Abe live a long and healthy life." She wondered if Leah was able to rest at the hospital. But more than likely she was keeping watch over Abe. If he'd died as my own, I'd be doing the same, she contemplated, lying in the darkness. If he'd stayed put, I would have been free for Mamma to ask for my promise on her deathbed. Too often she let her mind wander to this: that had she been living at home, Leah never would have been anywhere but the birthing room with Mamma, Aunt Lizzie, and the midwife. For Sadie had always been Mamma's right-hand girl, even prior to the years of her rumprunge, they had scarcely been apart. She had worked alongside Mamma in most respects.

She pictured Abe lying still as a stone in a hospital of many strangers, Englishers mostly and was startled at a

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keen sense of not wanting to lose him to death. Just as I lost my only son.

Weeping now, she felt compelled to continue her prayer to the almighty One.

"Dear God, let my brother live so that I might know him ... so that he might come to love me in part as he does Leah." Only after praying this would Sadie allow herself to rest.

What's to become of us if Abe dies? Lydiann wondered, lying wide-awake, having cried her eyes dry. Am I to grow up alone?

She thought she heard Sadie down the hall and raised herself up in the darkness to listen. The graceful, beautiful sister she'd missed knowing for nearly her whole life was sniffing in her bed, crying over Abe, too, probably. Getting up, she pushed her slippers on and tiptoed to the room her mamma Leah and Sadie shared. She tapped gently on the door. "Sadie, it's me . . . Lyddie."

She was told to come in, which she did gladly, especially thankful when Sadie held open the heavy quilt to welcome her to climb in.

"I could use some company tonight, too," said Sadie, her voice raspy.

"That's gut, 'cause I'm awful sad." Lydiann slipped into bed and felt the warmth of Sadie's arm around her. She nestled down like a kitten in a wicker basket.

"No need for both of us to be lonely tonight," Sadie whispered.

Lydiann smiled through her tears. "Were you ever, well, lonely before . . . ?" " " , , : ; . '

"Before I moved home, ya mean?" , , " , . ;

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"Til have to say I was always missing my family. . . espei Lilly Mamma . . . the mother who birthed both you and me. We were always ever so close."

Lydiann wondered if she dare ask the question burning in her. Was this the right time to bring up such a thing?

1 'In.- sighed and tried to go to sleep, but rest would not come.

11ii 11ing over, she lay facing the ceiling.

"What are ya thinkin' now?" Sadie asked.

"Not sure if I oughta say."

"You can ask me whatever ya like. How's that?" :

She could just imagine Mamma Leah saying this wasn't a

"id idea not tonight, not now, not ever. But Lydiann

liln'f so much care at the moment what anybody thought.

> she asked, "Why were ya treated so, Sadie? Why'd ya have

< no away?" ; : :. ., . . .

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I wo days following New Year's Day, along about midday, Abe was released from the Lancaster hospital. Evidently Dr. Schwartz had been keeping in touch with the attending physician by phone, for he kindly offered to drive both Leah and Abe home "to avoid further jostling in a buggy" was precisely the way the doctor had put it to Leah. She realized anew what wonderful-good friends and neighbors the Schwartzes were, and she'd gotten up the nerve to tell Dr. Schwartz as much during the ride back to Gobbler's Knob. Together, she and Abe had sat in the backseat, Abe leaning against her and quietly complaining of dizziness the length of the trip.

Once she resumed her work at the clinic, Leah intended to ask Dr. Schwartz privately about Abe's continuing symptoms, including his insistence that he had not returned to the frozen pond. The rest of the family would, no doubt, be just as concerned as she once Abe got settled back at home.

Meanwhile, they all of them had much to be grateful for, because their boy's injuries could have been far worse.

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I Lydiann tried to keep herself from bawling as she greeted I A he, she was so happy to see him. "What was it like at the | hospital? Did the nurses take gut care of ya? Did they let you I fill" ice cream?"

f "I think we best let your brother rest up before ya ask too I ninny questions," Mamma Leah said, to which Dat agreed, | nodding his head.

The entire family, including Dawdi John, who'd hobbled

(iver from next door, stood in Mamma's kitchen, awful happy

Id see Abe again. But it wasn't long before Mamma Leah and

Dat were taking him upstairs to lie down.

"Isn't he all better?" Lydiann followed them to the bottom I of the stairs and looked up with longing as her brother leaned I hard on Dat's arm.

I Briefly turning around, Dat chided her, "Hush now." I Lydiann hurried to Sadie's side at the cookstove, where I she had cooked up her best corn chowder. "What do ya make

of that?" she whispered. "Abe comes home and he can hardly ' walk. I saw him, Sadie. His balance is off-kilter!"

"Don't ya worry none," Sadie replied. "He'll be as gut as new. .. you'll see."

But Abe wasn't better that evening or the next morning, neither one. And Lydiann worried something truly terrible had happened to him over on Blackbird Pond, something Abe might never recover from.

Then and there, she decided it best not to tell her school friends what she'd seen with her own eyes, even though they were all asking about Abe. Dat had already gone to the school

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and informed the teacher that Abe would be missing some days just how many, no one could say.

The day following Leah's return with Abe, Sadie found her in the kitchen sweeping the floor. Silently, she set about cleaning up the wood stove, wondering how to raise the subject of the letter she'd hidden in her bureau drawer. She considered yet again the new barrier it was bound to create between the two of them as she continued her work, rubbing hard at the cookstove's surface. Maybe this still wasn't the best time, but Sadie couldn't wait another minute. Ever since her decision to come clean, the letter had begun to bore a hole in her bureau drawer, as well as in her heart.

So when Leah stopped sweeping to fetch the dustpan, Sadie straightened and inhaled deeply. The second she reappeared, Sadie blurted, "It's time I

talk to ya 'bout something, sister."

"Oh?" Leah was obviously innocent to what Sadie had in mind, for she continued with her work, bending low to sweep the floor debris onto the dustpan.

"I hate to upset ya, really I do ... but I've been wanting to make something right. And for a gut long time now."

At once Leah ceased her work, her eyes red and her face still pale from lack of sleep, most likely. "What's on your mind?" she asked.

Momentarily Sadie reconsidered. How selfish of me. Sighing, she knew she must not turn back. "When I was livin' in Millersburg years ago, I did something I must ask your forgive-

135heos lor." She pressed on. "It was a horrid thing I did. UnforLlvnMo, truly."

I Blinking her eyes, Leah frowned and stood tall with the Broom upright in her hand. "I have no idea what you're talking 'hour."

I "'Course, you don't." Scarcely could she go on, but she ulmitled how vexed she had been at the time over what she Id I had been an outright betrayal on Leah's part. "I was awful tilery you upped and spilled the beans to Mamma and Dat Boul my wild days . . . me gettin' myself in the family way 'n' till. So one day, when one of your letters to Jonas arrived in the mail, I dropped it in the rubbish as a way to get back at fpu- it wasn't till it was too late that I realized what a dreadlul thing I'd done. By then it was beyond possibility to Mil-neve the letter."

I Leah's face flushed red with unmistakable ire, but as Liiirkly as she allowed her wrath to show, she stepped back hikI breathed a great sigh. "I don't care to rehash my resentIflenr during those disturbing days" she wiped her brow with phe hack of her hand "but it does wonder me if that letter Blight not b^e the one explainin' some needful things to lonas."

I Meekly Sadie whispered, "You can know that for sure and lui certain."

I "What do ya mean?"

I "It's upstairs . . . tucked away." Sadie quivered. "The mailnuin delivered it here recently. ... It must've fallen out of the ll'iish truck all that time ago, although who can be sure just IVhat happened for it to find its way back here now." I Leah's eyes flickered. "Jah, go'n'get the letter for me." I Hurrying upstairs, Sadie found the concealed letter, her

I . . , ' " 135 ; V" " ' : "; ; ":

: ! I'mtM 136pulse racing as she hoped against hope her sister might find it in her heart to forgive.

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Taking short, quick breaths, Leah placed her hand on her chest. Why, O Lord, must this be happening now . . . when my thoughts of Jonas are few and far between?

Faithfully she had been reading Mamma's old Bible, and with her heart wide open, the Scriptures were filling the void left there by her tenderness for Jonas. God's Word offered her strength and even solace for her loneliness.

Yet now she couldn't help but recall how she'd felt so terribly heartbroken, assuming her sister had stolen her dear beau when Sadie had lived near Jonas during the time of his Millersburg cabinetmaking apprenticeship. In her desperation at the perceived deception, Leah had fully given herself up to the mercy of almighty God, drawing courage for her life from the love of her heavenly Father.

Sadie returned, holding out the letter. "It's soiled but unopened all the same,"

Leah nodded, unable to speak as she inspected the discolored postmark.

Sadie's voice was soft yet strained. "Can you ever forgive me;

Intently examining the envelope, Leah could not reply. She could discern the month and year not the actual day and went quickly to the utensil drawer and pulled out a table knife, slicing through the top of the envelope . . . and into the long-ago past. Suddenly it all felt so recent.

Opening the letter, she recognized the handwriting as her own and read the first few lines. Immediately she knew this surely was the most important letter she'd ever written. To

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pink Jonas had never known . . . never even laid eyes on it! ' She glanced up and noticed Sadie turning to leave the lichen, heading slowly, if not forlornly, toward the stairs, (in you ever forgive me? Her request echoed in Leah's ears. I / low many secrets must we bear? Leah clutched the letter, Ililchil lor the privacy, and wandered to the window, strug|lii|j; not to shake as she read through to the end. I When she finished, she refolded it gently and slipped it Ilk into the safety of its envelope. He never read my answers I his pointed questions about my friendship with Gid. Jonas never Bcic JJ131 heart on this. . . .

I She held it close to her and bowed her head under the

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linlm of her pain. No wonder his letters stopped, Leah thought

Inrlully. No wonder he never returned home to marry me.

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Something's awful wrong with Abe," Hannah confided in Mary Ruth, who'd come for a late afternoon visit nearly a week after their brother's discharge from the hospital. "He ain't nearly the same, and I've seen firsthand that it's true." She had to swallow hard as she tried not to cry, still wishing Dat would come to his senses and have the hex doctor work his magic on the boy.

Mary Ruth held little Mimi in her arms, rocking her slowly while Ida Mae and Katie Ann stacked small towers of wooden blocks near the cookstove. "Lorraine told Dottie head injuries of this nature take time to heal. . . and that came from Dr. Schwartz, naturally. Funny how the grapevine works on the outside, too."

Hannah didn't find talk of the grapevine at all amusing. Truth was, Mary Ruth's frequent visits were beginning to annoy Gid, being themselves the subject of tittle-tattle amongst the People. He'd told Hannah before Abe's accident, "Not such a gut idea for an Amishwoman-turned-Mennonite to be comin' round here and fillin' the preacher's wife's head

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I will be ill kinds of nonsense." He'd also confided the bishop had filled him in on the spot, questioning Hannah's close ongoing friendship with a Mennonite.

If Mary Ruth's my sister, for pity's sake, Hannah had thought long and hard, not daring to speak up. After all, having received the divine ordination, Gid was always right God's choice of faithful shepherd to this flock. There was to be no questioning the will of God, even though there were times when she did secretly wonder how the Lord God could look on Bishop Rontrager's heart and be pleased. Was it possible for a divine appointment to go off

beam ... for a man reckoned to be I|Ih* messenger of God to become blind and puffed up with Ifirlde?

I She could only hope such a thing would always be far Iffoin true of her handsome husband, although she had always Known him to have an opinion about most everything, just as Kiolh of their fathers staunchly did. The two older men had Ifcrcii quite similar in their thinking on most things, except IhiM'o lately Dat hadn't heeded his friend's advice to call the HK'X doctor Gid had said as much. This puzzled her no end, Bind she was relived Abe had managed to survive the blow to Ills head despite what might've happened with Dat disregarding the importance, even the sway, of a sympathy healer. I "When did you last see Abe?" she asked Mary Ruth, getliig up to take Mimi from her to nurse her. I "Just yesterday, when I took Carl for a visit after school." Mary Ruth said that Carl had been worried to the point of an lupsit stomach over his friend.

I lannah smiled faintly. "Well, it's mighty sure Carl's

IH-i (tine nearly part of the family, seems to me." She wondered

wliiil her sister might say to that.

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"Dat hasn't always been so keen on Carl's visits, but it seems to me that recently he's been a little more easygoing." Mary Ruth paused, giving Hannah a small smile. "He's surely got a new spring in his step." Mary Ruth rose and went to rescue several blocks the girls had allowed to roll under the corner cupboard. She got down on all fours, laughing as she did, because Ida Mae had come running over and hopped on her back as if Mary Ruth were a horse.

Hannah admitted she'd observed the same thing. "I suspect Dat won't always be a widower. . . though it ain't our place to speculate on his business," Hannah said, lifting baby Mimi onto her shoulder for burping. She wondered if now was the right time to tell Mary Ruth what Gid had

said about her visits here, though it pained her to think of doing so. Instead she again brought up the subject of her concern for Abe.

"Leah says our brother has been talkin' nonsense. His balance is off-kilter, too. It's got her mighty anxious."

Mary Ruth sat back down in the chair near the window, the light coming in and resting on her slender shoulders, making her hair look even blonder. "He must've hit his head awful hard."

Hearing Gid's footsteps outside, Hannah felt awful nervous now. What'll my husband say if he finds Mary Ruth here again?

She immediately rose and headed to her bedroom to put Mimi in her cradle, hearing Gid's voice as he greeted Mary Ruth out in the front room. Standing behind the bedroom door, she was hesitant to return, so she waited there, eavesdropping. : "Is Hannah here?" Gid asked.

"She's tucking Mimi in" came Mary Ruth's reply.

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I I hriv was a lull, but soon Gid said, "This ain't easy to say,

linn I've Ix-cn thinkin', Mary Ruth, 'bout the People and all.

P1m < (us il might be better if ya didn't speak your mind to Han-

|n ill no much."

I Mary Ruth remained silent.

I "Might just be best, too, if ya didn't come round here so

It i|I rn," Gid said flatly. "Hannah bein' the preacher's wife now

[hi ii I you bein'. . . well, Mennonite. Just doesn't set so gut with

Lmk- folk."

I Ac'/i, iiiil Hannah clutched her heart, because she'd never

Ilinird her husband talk so, not in that severe tone of voice . . .

Id"i even to a stubborn horse. She felt she might burst out

In', ing.

I As Mary Ruth walked down the mule road toward her IihiIiit's house, she could think only of her brother-in-law's in. i n admonishment. The formerly pleasant Gid had surely I lunged since his divine appointment. Fact was, Hannah in' i-i led loving encouragement she'd sunk into near despair lover Abe's accident, and even life's small concerns seemed to kill I hard at her. And now was Mary Ruth to obey Gid's warnillii; and be cut off from her own twin sister? A more intimate

11 in id she'd never known.

She breathed in the wintry air as she made her way out Inward the main road, bypassing a visit with Leah and Abe, ulllunigh her heart longed to stop in for a short while. She Wouldn't give in to worry over Abe, though, because she had made up her mind she was going to trust the Lord for her brother's healing. She must stand on the promises of God, let

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Him be at work in young Abe. "In all of us," she said aloud.

Soon her thoughts turned to Robert. While they had continued seeing each other since their frank discussion about Derek and Sadie, there had been no marriage proposal. Without a doubt, Robert was an upstanding man, one kind and good in every respect. She had every reason to love him. Robert

had all the qualities a good preacher should possess and all those of a good husband, too.

She found it curious that both she and Hannah were connected to ministers. One who humbly taught the full truth of God's Word, and one who, having been raised a smithy's son, was much more skilled at shoeing horses than at helping folk shod their feet with the preparation of the Gospel of peace. After all Gid Peachey had never had a speck of training. When the lot fell on a man, there were often days and weeks of actual mourning as the newly appointed man accepted the responsibility, even the burden, of the People resting soundly on his shoulders. Mary Ruth could just imagine that weight on Gid now, which might have been the reason for his harsh remarks to her today. Yet she would not allow her encounter with him to bring her discouragement, for a dispirited person was open to even more opposition from the enemy of the soul.

So Mary Ruth marched along the road with head high, ever so confident in the Lord. She was sure that in God's time, He could turn even this for good.

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Days had passed since Sadie's revelation, and since then Leah had seemed distracted, encumbered by her continued

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of Abe. Or perhaps it was newfound resentment toward

lie llmf made Leah so distant, although it seemed unlikely [l|m i slater to hold a grudge. Still, one thing was altogether l|lirtl tto offer of forgiveness had come. Maybe she's had enough, Ithouwlit Sadie.

I Meanwhile the original peace she'd experienced at her lionlt'ssion had faded, and old thoughts had returned to haunt ll'n'i -memories of dear Harvey and her blue babies. Memo^ii' -, too, of her shunning, Leah's seeming betrayal of her, and j>'i Derry and the terrible sin with him that had set things in | in"i Ion. If only dwelling on the past could make things different

1 / -i me,

I The afternoon weather had turned blustery and cold when S i. lie spotted Mary Ruth out on the road. Maybe Mary Ruth\\ in iius something of Derry . . . if he happens to know the fate of li'in baby, Sadie thought. But she decided she best not take off |imining after her, though she surely wanted to. She simply I'll' "ij there at the front room window, gazing after her sister, I v ' 'i iclering just what Mary Ruth might know about Derry I1'" liwartz. Will she say what she knows?

I I "inally, having tried her best to stay calm and not give in li' impulsiveness, she told Leah she was going for a short walk Jin id donned her wool coat, black outer bonnet, and snow

I-...is.

I "Where are ya headed?" Leah looked a bit surprised at the liimm unit of outer clothing she was piling on. I "Need some air, is all." I "(loin' up to see Hannah, maybe?" Leah pressed, eyes

in \filling more disquiet as Sadie reached for her muffler and

I

liniilens. i '.

I "I haven't decided just where," Sadie ribbed, feeling a sting

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of guilt, yet not changing her plan as she turned and walked out the back door. A strong wind nearly blew her back into the house, but stubbornly she pushed ahead.

When at last she caught up with Mary Ruth, she was more than a half mile from home, farther away than she had been since the outset of her present Proving. Farther, too, than was allowed on her own, really, but Sadie felt

she was safe from Miriam's eyes on such a cold and snowy day. Besides, if she kept her face forward, who'd know it was she beneath the big black winter bonnet?

"I saw you from the window," she told Mary Ruth, matching her stride as they went. "Need to talk to you privately."

Mary Ruth's face was red with the cold, but she didn't mince words. "Shouldn't you head back, what with the rules of your Proving and all?"

Sadie shook her head. "I'll risk that for now."

"Well. . . what's on your mind, then?"

Inhaling, she held in the frigid air before breathing out. "I've been wantin' to ask ya something for the longest time," she began. "It's about your beau's brother."

"Derek?" .: '

"Do ya happen to know him at all?"

Mary Ruth hesitated, as if pondering her response. "I've seen him only twice. Once long ago at the vegetable stand and, later, out on the road at Christmastime some years ago now. Why do you ask?"

Pausing, Sadie worried how her questions might sound, but she persisted. "Do you know he was the father of my first baby?"

Mary Ruth nodded. "In fact, he wasn't shy about telling

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Ww who In- was that Christmas Day. I must say, I was mighty

liMtfH'lNeil,"

I "Plil ho ask about the baby... or me?"

I Miiry Ruth said she recalled that afternoon quite clearly.

I "11*' ecmed to be in a big hurry. . . headed down this same
Ifnmi, toward the house."

I "Our house, ya mean?"

I "That's right. He was out of sorts, swinging his arms like
|h<' whs lookin' for a fight."

I Smlii- didn't care to reflect on the way Derry had behaved
l* Im n he was irritated; he'd displayed his bad temper too many
Ilimi'M lor her to forget. "Did you tell him I wasn't livin' at
in' niie liny longer?"

I "Since we'd heard you were married to Jonas Mast back
It I m ii, I said you were out in Ohio somewhere and married.
IlLiI was all."

I Sadie slowed her pace now. "Anything else?"

I "lie asked if you'd had a boy or a girl, and I told him your
Bul'V son had died at birth. That was pretty much the end of
|tln conversation. He turned and left, headed back toward his
*,iit-iii's' house." *.

I Sadie breathed more deeply, taking all this in. Derry had
|i. i'ii heading toward Dat's house. Why was that?

1 I hey fell silent for some time, walking more briskly to

1 i p warm.

I When they grew closer to the Nolts' place, Sadie asked if

I" i i Robert talked about his brother.

I "hast I heard, Derek's stationed somewhere out in Wash'

Ini:inn state. He hasn't been home in seven years... not

in i< c I bat Christmas." Mary Ruth was frowning. "I'm worried

III.H you're asking all these questions, Sadie. You never should

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have met him in the first place. Why would you want to know about him now?"

Abruptly, Sadie stopped walking. "I wondered what he knew. I guess I thought it might help me to put the whole thing to rest and forget the past."

"This happened a long time ago. And since I've told you everything you need to know, why not head on home?" Mary Ruth urged. "I'm nervous for you."

Sadie felt she was walking on dangerous ground, too, having wandered this far already. "Jah, s'pose you're right."

Mary Ruth turned and hugged her. "So long for now."

Waving, Sadie turned and started back down the lonely road. She shivered against the fierce cold and, when the weather turned even more blustery, she wished she'd stayed put at home in the kitchen near the wood stove. What

did it matter, anyway, that Derry had asked about her or their baby? So cruel he was, she thought.

Less than halfway home, a squall of snow came up. She tugged on her coat and drew the muffler around her neck more securely, bracing herself against an afternoon storm that had in short order become a full-blown blizzard.

Sadie tried in vain to see her way, unsure if she was wandering toward the shoulder or out into the middle of the road. But she kept going, hoping she might make it home before Dat or Leah began to worry. Her hands, feet, and face were so cold they were beginning to sting with pain, yet she must not focus on that. Reminded of young Abe's struggles with frostbite, she happened to notice automobile headlights creeping toward her. Moving out of the way, she was surprised to see Robert Schwartz waving at her through the snowy windshield.

Mary Ruth's beau stopped, opened the car door, and

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IWIkUkI slk1 get inside. "What are you doing out in this?" he

< Mhe didn't think twice about accepting his invitation,

Vm though i lie mandate on her Proving was once again

(filed I lie minute she climbed inside the warm car.

^|il< you," she said, shivering uncontrollably. "I thought I

^B liniki' it home. ..."

^Thiink (he Lord I saw you."

^Jhli." She was grateful indeed and kept her face forward,

^Ag n| iff as can be as he turned the car around and headed

^Wil her father's house. "I'm much obliged," she said, not
^wl I \g what else to say now that she was alone with Derry's
^m brother.

^Your family will be glad to see you safe," Robert said.

^Blit' mentioned she'd just spent some time walking with

^B Ruth. "She sent me on home."

^B'll get word to her by phone that you're safe and sound,

^MI nrrlve home."

^my f>/ionc. . .

^Htily, Mary Ruth had all the conveniences of the world

^HuLioinc b%)yfriend with a fast, warm car; a pretty house to

^Bi with heat, electric, and a telephone.

^he was glad for the offer. "I might've lost my way in the

^H II you hadn't come along."

^Hf not that, at least I may have spared your hands and

^B'Min frostbite."

^Hn' smiled at that, though her face was so numb she could

^Hdy feel the muscles move. "There's the lane to the

^Hi" she said, pointing to the left.

^HTiLinks, I would have missed it," he acknowledged with

^Huklc Making the turn, he stopped the car without a

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warning and set the brake. "Uh, Sadie." He turned to face her. "Mary Ruth shared with me what happened between you and my brother some years ago." His face was solemn, even sad. "I'd like to offer an apology on behalf of Derek."

Sadie was both stunned and moved. "That's kind of you, but it's not for you to say." Still, she greatly appreciated the

courteous gesture.

"It's best, I believe, that my brother's long gone. Otherwise, you might be tortured by running into him from time to time."

"Jah" was all she could manage to utter, looking away

now.

Without saying more, Robert released the brake and inched the car forward. The tense conversation was behind them, yet she marveled at the timing of her encounter with Mary Ruth's beau. Who would have thought, when she'd set out to catch up with Mary Ruth earlier, she would be hearing apologetic words from no less than Derry's own brother?

However, when they arrived near the back door, she was completely aghast. Bishop Bontrager was walking to his carriage, leaning hard into the wind. But just before he moved to step in, he looked straight at her. Their eyes met and held.

"Oh," she groaned with deepest despair. "I'm surely ruined."

"Beg your pardon?" Robert said.

She shook her head, again muttered a feeble thanks for the ride, and headed out into the elements, toward the house and her certain Schicksaal her fate.

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I In- bishop motioned for Sadie to follow him back into the kutl*t\ where she stood, unmoving, in the utility room as the BJ| ol' Gnd announced to both her father and herself that BjWns fo he sent away for her disobedience. BmYnf away? She hung her head not so much in shame as Bailment. Surely Bishop Bontrager knew she would never BS accepted a ride with a man had it not been for the Me weather. Still, she knew she'd ignored the rules of the BVIIdk and for ifrat deserved what she was getting. Bill spoke up. "But the blizzard . . ." he said, attempting to BMid lier. "Sadie wouldn't have "

BSSiK'h has no bearing on the matter at hand," the bishop BS lifting him off. At once the older man turned and |HcJ out the door, leaving Sadie standing alone with Dat, BXdy able to raise her eyes to his. When she did so at last, P? anight his look of both disappointment and aggravation. K'nh a low groan, Dat walked toward the kitchen.

IHshoji would've sooner I froze to death, Sadie decided, going i' 1110 window to watch his horse and buggy head down the

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lane toward the main road. The back of the buggy whisked out of sight as it quickly became shrouded in the whiteout of dense, wind-driven snow. Moving from the doorway, she hung her coat on the wooden peg and, feeling dreary, removed her mittens, muffler, and boots. From the kitchen came the low hum of voices no doubt the rest of the family was talking about the bishop's visit.

Why'd he come on such a dismal, stormy day, anyway?

Suddenly she knew: The bishop had come to see how poor Abe was faring.

She could have kicked herself for having chosen this day to display such open disobedience. The lie she'd told Leah earlier hung on her conscience like a yoke; she'd drifted much too far from the house, not to mention accepted a ride in an automobile with a man. All were clear violations of the Proving.

Sadie sighed deeply. How foolish I am to have tempted fate

so. . . .

Leah had suspected all along where Sadie had gone, because not but a few minutes before her departure, Mary Ruth had walked past the house, probably coming from a visit with Hannah. If Sadie didn't flat out lie, saying she didn't know where she was going! Now her untruthful sister was coming into the kitchen, her cheeks mighty red from the cold in spite of her ride home in Robert Schwartz's car, of all things. What on earth was she thinking?

Sadie didn't stop to say hello or to join in their conversation, all of them having hot cocoa at the table she simply forced a smile and made her way to the stairs. Leah could hear the quickness of her sister's footsteps as Sadie nearly flew upstairs.

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] 'ir's been caught again, Leah thought, feeling both sad and

|v ><l about what additional church discipline might do to

I' In'-, emotional state. She found herself tuning out the talk Luii J her, anxious about how the bishop would ultimately land If t his transgression, with Sadie already nearly three munili.s into her Proving.

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I he afternoon after the bishop's visit, while Abram and tih were out in the barn amidst the cows and the milk buckH -, Ahntm brought up his great frustration, for possibly the I>M.I lime. "Sadie needs to be livin' with us, not somewhere

11 > "us not for widows to live apart from family." | I eah was sitting in Sadie's usual place under OF Rosie,

|>l -ing the cow's teats for all she was worth, evidently irri-

|-ii' . I no end. "This could push Sadie into deepest grief yet j .hi. Seems to me she just got home."

|.ili, I was surprised she held up as well as she did yesterI > I lie bishop talked mighty straight to her. His face was |. mi i;;ht purple."

I "So . . . do ya think Bishop will hold a firm stand?" Leah

L-r,|.

j A hi am considered this. "Hard to say. I'm hopin' he comes

I1 lii-. senses, and right quick."

j \ I tram went on to mention he'd spoken with Dawdi John

II i I lie bishop's harsh stance toward Sadie, and Dawdi

j|i'i' 11 l hey must go along with it, whether they liked it or jii "What about Mary Ruth could she make room at the ||..lr.' lor Sadie?" he asked. I I eali sighed softly. "How would that set with the brethren,

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her livin' with Englishers and all?"

"The Nolts are less fancy than, say, the doctor and his wife. I don't know where else she could go right now." His heart sank as he worried about losing another daughter to the world. He wanted Sadie under his roof, or within close riding distance at least, in hopes the bishop might allow them to visit her on occasion. Most folk under church discipline benefited greatly from words of kindness and admonition.

Truth be known, Abram wished he'd spoken up even more to the bishop yesterday when Sadie returned home the elderly minister was taking this much too far. Sure, she's broken specific requirements of the Proving, but the discipline doesn't seem to match the offense. If Robert hadn't come along in his car when he did, who knows where they might've found his eldest daughter. Abram's heart was torn between the Ordnung and his love for Sadie, and there was no getting around it.

Leah's good-byes to Sadie were not nearly as emotional as Lydiann's tearful farewell. Poor Lyddie followed her all the way out to the sleigh, crying her name. Now she stood with nose pressed to the front window, watching Dat take Sadie up to the Nolts'. Dottie herself had surprised them by coming over, once the roads were plowed, to drop Mary Ruth and Carl by to visit Abe, who was still suffering headaches and frequent dizzy spells. Leah had made it a point to follow Dottie out the back door, where she had quickly shared the family's dilemma, taking care not to point fingers at the bishop. Surprisingly Dottie had taken to the idea with enthusiasm, and the arrangements had been made just that quickly. Sadie

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Ifirtil > inssly gone to pack her bags when Dat had okayed the

I l.ydiann hurst out sobbing to high heavens when she Ii-Mild mi longer see the horse and sleigh moving down

II iiiii'gclown Road. "Dat's takin' my big sister away from me!" I "Adi, don't cry so, Lyddie," said Leah, going and wrap[ffilH her arms around her. "Surely the bishop will let us visit Ifimlle now and then . . . help her get back on the straight and Iftiiri'ow. Surely he will."

1 "Hui you don't know that for sure . . . and she's goin' to

P I iiv Ruth now. . . and Carl, too." Lydiann wept in Leah's

|<M >>i',, "Just when I was gettin' to know her. Just when . . ."

I' In riicd as if her heart might break.

I Li-ah let Lydiann cling to her. "We can pray this will all

If ..ik out for the best."

I yd i arm leaned back and looked up at her with tear-filled

I .. "What do ya mean?"

I "I spect I'll be talkin' to God 'bout all this," she whispered

Ii' Iut dear girl. "And you can, too."

I Lydiann blinked her eyes and a slight frown crossed her

hi"i >w. "I don't understand."

I "There are times like right now when the Lord God

lu< nildn't mind hearin' a prayer from our hearts. One we make

lip nil our own, so to speak."

I "Not the prayers we usually say in our heads, then? The

Imic.'i we think of at dinnertime and before bed?"

I "That's just what I'm tellin' you. There are times when, if

|v i led as if your heart's breaking, 'tis best to call on the Lord

in i'I say what's on your mind."

I Lydiann burst into a smile just then and pressed against

n-i, hugging her hard. "I'll just do that, Mamma. I will!"

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And deep within herself, Leah knew she, too, must be offering similar prayers more often.

Mary Ruth cried when she saw Sadie standing at the front door. She hurried to greet her sister, and the two fell into each other's arms. "Oh, Sadie, I'm so sorry."

"Ain't your fault," Sadie whimpered. " 'Tis all my doin'. I deserve this... I know I do."

Mary Ruth led her upstairs and showed her where she could put her clothes for the time being, saying that Dottie had offered more storage space in a seasonal closet down the hall. "You'll be ever so comfortable here," she said. "You'll

see.

Sadie sat on the bed, looking all around. "Mercy sakes, I've never seen such a perty bedroom." Then she smiled a little. "Well, now, how could I, since I've never been inside an Englisher's bedroom before now?"

Mary Ruth didn't want to tell Sadie that it wouldn't take too long and she'd become adjusted to the warmth of the rooms each morning, not to mention the indoor bathroom and other luxuries. But such modern conveniences were not good enough reason to leave Amish life behind. "I'm glad you'll be stayin' here," she said, going to sit next to Sadie on the bed. "Maybe we'll get caught up some now."

Sadie nodded sadly. "Denki, Mary Ruth, for sharin' your room and all."

"I'm glad to do it." She hoped to share more than just the room. Given the time, Mary Ruth was eager to share the Lord Jesus with Sadie, as well.

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I lli was a late riser that Saturday, so Leah went to his door in*I knocked lightly. "Dat? It's Leah ... are you awake yet?"

"|;ih, come in" was his reply.

Ivt'ling right peculiar at his response, she did as she was iihI. She saw him sitting in the corner of the room near the in-. lamp, Mamma's open Bible on his lap. "Leah," he said, Mi' you happen to know, by chance, when your mamma ii.iiiril markin' up this here Bible?"

A breath caught in her throat, and she saw then that tears llij his eyes. "It was some years ago . . . long before Lydiann v.r, born."

A nearly reverent hush passed between them.

"Are ya certain?" Dat asked.

She nodded her head. "Mamma loved to read God's OC'hJ." She hoped she wasn't speaking out of turn, recalling I" i|iiiet tones in which Mamma had spoken on the several ii ' .isions she and Leah had discussed such matters.

"I awakened at midnight," Dat said. "The wind... or li.ivlx1 it was the*Lord God, woke me out of a deep sleep. I've nrri sittin' here reading near every underlined passage in this iru' Biewel . . . two or three times each."

I ,eah stood silently, staring at her father.

I \t placed one hand gently on the open pages. "I have to till nil" that I think I know why your mamma walked the floor li-iirly ev'ry night, prayin' over her children . . . and me. Jah, u-lk've I do. . . ." His voice faltered.

I -eah knew, as well, but she yearned to hear Dat say it, inm I ing to know if he truly understood just what it was that Hi I a near-holy smile on Mamma's face each and every day.

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"Ida grasped the most important things about God. She understood them . . . and she lived them, ain't so?"

Leah nodded. "Oh, Dat, she did that."

He closed the Bible and placed both hands on top. "I want what my precious Ida had. How should I go 'bout getting

it?"

Leah glanced over her shoulder, wondering if either Lydiann or Abe had come downstairs yet. "The best I know to tell ya is to do what I did ... open your heart wide to the Lord Jesus." She wouldn't reveal at this moment that she'd nearly memorized some of the passages in Mamma's Bible.

"The Good Book says to come to Him as a little child," Dat said, wiping his eyes.

Leah felt a lump rise in her throat. "I should say so" was all she could whisper for her joy.

Once the milking and breakfast were finished, Abram wasted no time. He found Lizzie in the small kitchen of the Dawdi Haus.

" 'Tis a brisk mornin', but I'd like to take ya out for some fresh air and maybe a sticky bun," he said quietly, lest her father overhear their conversation from the front room. "How'd that be?"

Her pretty hazel eyes lit up like it was Christmas all over again. "Can ya first spare me a half hour?"

Too eagerly, he bobbed his head. "I'll get the horse hitched up and come for ya right quick."

She beamed her interest, and he headed back through the

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11 nil i room, where John was starting to snore or prellii|.; to.

^B This w:is no time to give in to his emotions, yet Abram ^grd lo reach for Lizzie's hand as they rode along in the ^VlHY of the family buggy. His heart pounded at the idea, Hn It was all he could do to redirect his thoughts. Yet the ^w 11,111 lie had come to love was sitting next to him, and they ^l< alone, under heaven's canopy.

^K 11 icy lalked of Sadie's pitiless ousting by the bishop, and ^Hllc pointed out that Sadie had seemed to purposely go HPy'uiul ilie boundaries of the Proving. "Wouldn't ya say so,

A | lit

Ahlillll:

"Jah, I agree on that, though I don't see it as out-and-out i (he 11 ion." He went on to share how troubled he was by their Iii-<lt< >|i. "It's one thing after 'nother, seems. I almost wonder if Hnnii.iger has it in for me and my household."

! i-,:ii' nodded, stirring as she sat next to him in the caril.ii'i " Dea* Sadie's bound to be doubly dejected about now, till niournin' her dead husband and all."

II Abram didn't control himself, he might simply allow

I In' Ik use to trot along, let go the reins, and take this out-

h|ni|..cii hut dear woman in his arms right now in broad day-

lii-lii. And, goodness, wouldn't that be a telling picture if

wiiurinie came riding along in the opposite direction?

1^1'or a fleeting second, he wished he were a young fellow

^H'f again and he and his sweetheart-girl were out riding

^Hfi I he covering of night. No wonder young folk courted

^H1 sundown. Made plenty of good sense to him, now that

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the tables were turned and he was the one falling in love . . . for the second time.

But first things first. "Lizzie?" His voice cracked as he held tight the reins.

"Jah, Abram?"

"I want to tell ya 'bout what happened to me this morning while I was readin' Ida's Bible." He found it mighty easy to pour out his heart to his

deceased wife's devout younger sister. "I believe I've seen the light... a long time comin', I daresay."

He knew Lizzie understood what he meant when she gave him the sweetest smile he'd seen in recent memory. "Ach, 'tis true. I see Jesus in your eyes."

He nodded, eyes filling quickly with tears. "I've resisted much too long, sorry to say. I 'spect heaven's pursuit of me has the Lord himself near tuckered out."

Her soft laugh encouraged him greatly. "I guess you can say you've joined the ranks of the silent believers, ain't so?"

"There ain't a doubtful bone in my body."

"Thank the Lord above," she said.

"Jah, the Lord sought me out, indeed." He drew in a long breath, because what he planned to say next was definitely going to be more difficult. "I've been thinking 'bout something else, too, for quite some time."

Will she welcome this news? he wondered, becoming more hesitant now that he realized how far out he was about to stick his neck. No question, the thought of her rejecting him would do him in. Should he forge ahead?

It was then she surprised him and reached over and placed her hand on his. " 'Tis all right, Abram. Say what's on your mind."

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I (Inivssing her hand, he turned to face her. "Lizzie, my

hli'-mi, I'm liL-nd over heels in love with ya."

I I lei smile was even brighter than before.

I I l<- didn't waste any time. "Oh, ya just don't know how

Igwfiil murk . . ."

I Tk-y rode along for another good half hour, but before
 Ilk y inine to the turnoff to the Ebersol Cottage, Abram asked
 Ivt-lili > nnfidence, "Will ya accept me as your husband?"
 I ""(,ourse I will, Abram. I'd be right happy to." Lizzie
 It-ll'lii'i shilly-shally one bit. By the look on her face, it was
 Ipvidrni Lizzie knew, just as he did, that they were meant to
 1 <i io|,;rlher as husband and wife as soon as possible.
 I I k- lifted her small hand to his lips and planted a kiss
 Iflu if, not caring at all now who spied them.

(llory be! Lizzie felt as if she might take off flying, so happy tin was as she
 headed into the Dawdi Haus. "Dat, I've got Biuiciliin' to tell ya," she called
 to her father, who was still kin I'.injj; in ffis favorite chair.

Ik1 roused momentarily, eyebrows raising, then eyelids flitIIni: shut.

"No, no, now stay awake to listen to your maidel daughJi i," she said,
 crouching near his knee. "I've got me a beau, I ' ii. Abram Ebersol, your
 own son-in-law. Now, what do ya flunk of that?" She watched his
 expression closely. How Uuulil he take his Ida's being replaced by her
 sister? I I k-aring Abram's name must have awakened him, for now |i'i
 l;ilher was all eyes. "Well, now, what did you say?" I "You heard me, didn't
 ya? And you're the first to know

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something else . . . I'm gettin' married here 'fore too long." She could scarcely keep her voice at a whisper, where it needed to be, at least for now.

An endearing smile spread across her father's craggy face. "Ah, Lizzie ... my dear girl. I'm mighty glad to hear it." He paused before saying, "I guess I'm not too surprised, really. I've been wonderin' if the old fella wasn't sweet on you."

"So, then, you're all right with it? You can give us your blessing?"

He chuckled it was a quick little cackle, almost gleeful. "Aw, go on. You's don't need my approval. You're old enough to make up your own minds, for goodness' sake!"

Leaning over, she kissed his rough cheek. "I'm ever so happy. . . really I am."

"Happiness is short-lived, I daresay, so make the most of it while ya can." He was grinning now, and he reached for her hand and squeezed it.

"I just wish my mother had lived to see this day."

He nodded. "It's natural you'd be thinkin' thataway."

She rose and headed for the kitchen, where she set to brewing a nice big kettle of tea a kind of celebratory pot to be shared between her elderly Dat and herself. Truly, I've never been so happy!

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YX line dragged. Lydiann watched the minute hand move jhward the numeral twelve, ever so anxious for ten-o'clock ji 1 '-s.s 10 come this bright and snowy Monday. She knew Carl |l 1 11I Mime seatwork to complete before he would be allowed I' |i|:iy, so she'd volunteered to help redd up the cloakroom [uliilr lie worked at his desk and the teacher was outdoors hup 1 vising the rest of the children.

At: last it was time, and the teacher reminded some of the y miiger pupils to sharpen pencils and visit the outhouse. when Lydiann got the go-ahead to sweep the cloakroom, she piiN k'lad. Once all the children had filed out to recess, she funk the broom from the hook and hurriedly swept the dirt Ik mi 1 he floor, scooped it up into the dustpan, and dumped it inii 1 1 he trash can near the teacher's desk. That done, she tip-

1. .1 -i I over to Carl's desk, where he was dawdling with his penil, not working his problems.

"I)id ya get behind in arithmetic?" she asked.

"A little."

"But you ain't doin' what you're s'posed to, are ya?"

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He pulled a face and then put down his pencil. "What're you doing inside during recess, anyway?"

"Got somethin' to ask, that's all." She glanced toward the door, hoping none of the other pupils would come bursting in just then. "I've been wonderin'. Can you read Amish even though you don't speak it?"

His face turned red but he nodded. "I know it from my uncle Paul, the one who used to be Amish. He taught me to read Pennsylvania Dutch, which isn't, by the way, called Amish."

"Sure it is."

"No, that's only what Amish folk call it." He looked so determined, she decided to let him have the last word.

"Did your uncle ever join church?" she asked, more softly now.

"Nope. He bought himself a tractor instead."

"Oh." She thought on that. "Seems he must not have thought much of the Old Ways, then."

Carl shrugged. "Not when it comes to farming. Why waste all that time plowing, planting, and harvesting with horsedrawn wagons and whatnot when you can be done with it in short order with a tractor? Seems right silly to me."

"But tractors have inflatable tires, and that's a no-no."

Again he shook his head. "Rubber tires or steel tires, tractors or horses or mules. Isn't it all about getting the job done?"

"You'd have to talk to our bishop 'bout that."

"So you can't think for yourself?" Carl smiled faintly.

She pouted at that. "I've been wonderin' something else."

"What now?"

She didn't like his tone but pressed on. "What's it like bein' adopted?" ,: ' . : :

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"You oughta know that." ::'. ::,;,'

"What do ya mean?"

"I don't want to speak out of turn, but aren't you and Abe adopted in a way? Mary Ruth says your real mamma died when Abe was born, so your sister

Leah has raised you like you're her own."

Mary Ruth says ; . ; . .

Why was her sister's name so quick out of his mouth? Still, she thought on what he'd said till she got up the nerve to ask, "Do you know your true family at all?"

He stared at her. "That's a silly question and you know it, Lyddie. I'm living with my true family. It doesn't matter to me who my birth parents were."

"Were? Do ya mean your parents died?" , , -

"I didn't say that."

She could see he was upset, even angry. "I'm sorry, Carl."

"No, I don't think you are." He got up and went to the cloakroom, where he threw on his coat and scarf and hurried outside, slamming the door behind him.

Now what have I done?

Not only had she poked her nose in Carl's life, but he would surely catch what-for since she'd kept him from completing his seatwork.

He's got every right to tattle on me, Lydiann thought, returning to the cloakroom to make sure there was not a speck of iliit on the floor. . . ,.,.,. :

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The coffee shop in Apple Creek, Ohio, was jam-packed with customers, especially the back room, which was solely

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populated by Amishmen. Jonas made his way through the maze of tables toward his friend Lester Schlabach, who nodded his head when he caught sight of Jonas.

"Sounds like a crowded hen house in here," Jonas corn' mented amidst the chatter.

Lester laughed. "You oughta come out for coffee more often . . . you'd get used to the racket mighty quick."

"S'pose so, but orders for hope chests keep me downright busy these days almost more work than I can handle on my own. Must be plenty-a girls turnin' sixteen this year." : "Awful gut for the pocketbook, I'll bet."

Jonas agreed and motioned for the waitress. He ordered a pot of coffee and a raspberry sticky bun for each of them his and Lester's favorite pastry insisting today was his treat.

When the waitress had gone, Lester stroked his beard, pulling it into a point. "I saw in The Budget that Eli Gingerich is goin' out of the plumbing business and is havin' himself a big sale here 'fore too long."

"I saw that, too. He wants to tear down some of his old shop and rebuild it to make a woodworking one."

"Some competition for ya?"

"Not a problem, really. Ain't enough woodworkers to go round here."

"That old bishop of yours back in Pennsylvania prob'ly wouldn't see eye to eye with ya though, ain't?"

Jonas looked hard at Lester and solemnly nodded his head. The mention of Bishop Bontrager reminded him again why he'd ended up living here in Ohio all these years, estranged from his parents and brothers and sisters. "Doubt I'd agree with much of what Bishop Bontrager thinks anymore."

"Seems to me I recall you sayin' he didn't take too kindly

l) n lellas who shunned farming."

Shunned. He supposed Lester had completely forgotten thiii he lived under the Bann himself, although it did not I t l' l v c T Jonas in his daily routine here. Nevertheless, he did have a family in Pennsylvania he missed terribly.

"My old bishop felt it was a fella's duty to follow in his

I hiilu-r's footsteps and work the land. He took a mighty strong

| Miind on that." Among other things, he thought. Shunning folk

Hoi leaving behind the church of their baptism was unheard

I ul in Wayne County, far as he knew. "I wish my people back

Inline could have a chance to sit under the teaching of the

] Apple Creek bishop. There was a wonderful-gut bishop like

I hat in Millersburg, too," he said, recalling the short time he'd

upont with the Mellinger family. It had been David Mellinger

who had given him such a strong start in cabinetmaking with

hi valuable apprenticeship. "Those two Ohio bishops and my

I It inner bishop are the difference 'tween night and day, for sure

I mid for certain."

I Lester perked up his ears. "You mean to say your Pennsylviiiiia family doesn't hear sermons like ours?" j "Well, it wftuld be awful hard to know that anymore, liviilly." It felt to him as if many decades had come and gone jsiiuc his last visit to Lancaster County, back when he and

91 call Ebersol were engaged and looking ahead to a happy and I bright future together. He could only assume that Bishop I hmitrager still kept the clamps on the People of Gobbler's I Knob and Georgetown, but there was no way to be sure, since [till communication had been cut off to him and from him. ! I li- cared not to cause trouble for his parents and siblings, or [h is extended family and former friends, by attempting to make It H hidden contact. What's done is done. ; .

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He hadn't planned to, but he began to tell his new friend how he had a whole batch of siblings, some of whom were grown and probably married by now. "My youngest brother and sister will be ten years old come this April."

"Twins?"

"Jah, and I haven't seen them since they were babies."

"How odd . . . them havin' a big brother they've never known."

Sadly he agreed. But there was nothing he could do about any of that. With the blessing of the heavenly Father and the People here, he'd put his roots down deeply and joyfully in Apple Creek. What more could a man want?

It was a brutally cold afternoon when Mary Ruth suggested she and Sadie go and sit near the fireplace in the Nolts' well-decorated front room. Sadie politely accepted the cup of hot peppermint tea her sister offered, her sad eyes brightening when Carl came to kneel beside her, showing a drawing he'd made at school.

"That's awful perty," Sadie said.

Carl handed the picture to her. "It's for you ... to keep."

"Well, how nice." Sadie stared down at the crayoned picture of a big brown horse and a small gray buggy. "This looks like the bishop's horse," Sadie said, holding it up for Mary Ruth to see.

"Well, I'm not so sure about that. Seems to me it might just be Dat's horse," Mary Ruth replied, studying the drawing.

Carl frowned. "How can you tell the difference when there are so many horses and buggies?"

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"i)h, believe me, we know," Sadie laughed. i Mary Ruth nodded. "Same way an Amishman knows hvliirli straw hat belongs to him, even though dozens of hats jlnii;lil he lined up on a bench."

I ('arl asked about Amish farm life, and Sadie seemed eager fin icll him about milking a cow by hand, feeding chickens, [mhI pitching hay to the mules and horses. "Sometime you Iftlimild talk to Leah 'bout all that," she said. "She knows all in nil- is to know about farm animals."

! M;iry Ruth found herself daydreaming about next Friday it'i in ing, when Robert planned to drive her to Honey Brook, IwIhmV they would dine at a "very fine restaurant." A tingle of mxi i lenient ran up her spine as she wondered if he would mnii) say he loved her. If so, she wondered if it was the right limit- to say it back to him. Handsome as he was kind, Robert Ivvitulil make any girl's heart glad, yet he had chosen her, and If he passage of time had proven that neither of them wanted In lei anything prevent their hopes for the future not even Ilir past foolishness of her sister and Robert's younger brother. Ill ;iny event, the likelihood of Sadie and Derek ever crossing li.iibs again was quite slim.

I She turned her attention back to Sadie and Carl, who wen' now sitting side by side on the hearth looking at a storyin ink. Sadie's voice was gentle and low, but the expression she liivc to the phrases on the page impressed Mary Ruth so much |'M< wondered if she might invite Sadie to come with her to ii IH >ol as a volunteer tomorrow. She could certainly put somein ir io work part-time helping with a few struggling pupils. It M/,i;/i(keep Sadie's mind off herself, Mary Ruth thought. But Ilii'ii she worried that such a thing might put Sadie even more I risk with the Amish brethren, so she decided against it.

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What's to become of her?

Sadie had confided to her just today she wouldn't be staying on at the Nolts', wanting to find work outside the Amish community, but Mary Ruth hoped that wouldn't happen, not when it would break the hearts anew of everyone in the Ebersol Cottage to see her leave them once more. If her time here lasted long enough, maybe Sadie might begin to understand more of God's plan for her life, perhaps through the simple Bible stories she was even now reading aloud.

Leah picked her way through the ice and snow to the barn to speak with Gid and Dat, leaving Abe alone at the table with his schoolwork. "I won't be long," she'd told him, rushing out the back door into the dusk.

In the stillness of the stable, she cautiously asked Dat's and Gid's permission to pay a short visit to Sadie tomorrow at the Nolts', telling them she wanted to encourage her to repent to the bishop for her misconduct. Leah also had something else on her mind, but she didn't go so far as to reveal that.

Dat looked at Gid. and asked, "Have ya given any more thought to what we discussed?"

Gid shook his head. "Haven't talked to the bishop just yet, no." He paused, glancing at Leah. "I'm the youngest preacher in the district and . . . well. . ." He didn't finish the thought, but Leah knew he must be hesitant to make waves with Bishop Bontrager.

Dat continued. "Well, I can see your point, but it's important we get our girl back home."

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sii 169The ^Prodigal

I (ikl nodded thoughtfully, but it was fairly obvious to Leah
phiil Ik- wasn't so keen on the idea, what with the bishop's
pOU(,;li stand on breaking the requirements of a Proving.
r Hui Gid seemed to catch Leah's sense of urgency when she
link I .she'd heard tell from Mary Ruth that Sadie was thinking
mf pelting a job and moving closer to Strasburg.

I "Sadie isn't that stubborn, is she?" he asked.

I "jiih," Leah replied. "But I daresay she's not thinkin'

Idrarly yet... still distraught over losin' her husband so awful

|V""inl'-"

I (iiii put down his pitchfork. "I'll go 'n' talk things over |u ii 11 I he bishop
and see what can be done." I "You're headin' over there now7." Dat sounded
mighty surIpaiM'J,

I "Time's a-wastin'." Gid looked right at Leah and smiled. rWouldn't it be
mighty nice if this family came together once In 1.1 lor all?"

Leah felt joy in her heart at his words. But would he actually succeed in
getting the bishop to change his mind?

After enjoying Dottie's delicious crumb cake with appleiiure, Mary Ruth
and Sadie slipped away upstairs to the bedp ii mi they now shared, where
Mary Ruth offered to brush her pl'.icr's hair.

"Aw, you don't have to do that," Sadie said, seemingly ftuirhed by the
gesture.

"But I want to." She coaxed Sadie to sit on the chair while she stood behind
her, whispering a silent prayer.

"Ya know, Leah and I used to take turns brushin' each

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other's hair of an evening," Sadie said softly, even sadly.

"We both have happy memories of growing up in Dat and Mamma's big house." Mary Ruth began making long sweeps down Sadie's golden locks with the brush.

Sadie nodded. "Ain't that the truth."

They talked about the endless winter, how cold it was, and how much Mary Ruth loved teaching school.

Out of the blue, Sadie asked, "When will Carl turn ten?"

"This spring."

She was silent for a moment, then "Same age as my first little one . . ."

Mary Ruth's heart went out to her, and she wondered if being around Carl was an emotional hardship. "Do you find it difficult to be around Carl for that reason?"

"Oh no ... not at all," she promptly reassured her. "My stay here has been delightful hardly the punishment the bishop had planned for me. But even so, I need to find my own place and land myself a job."

"You'd really leave the Amish life behind?" Mary Ruth asked. "Is that what your heart's telling you?"

"Oh, I don't know what I want anymore. I can hardly abide the bishop and his rules I just felt so locked up in Dat's house. There were plenty of days I

wished I could hop in the buggy and drive off to Georgetown to run errands or whatnot. And now look where I am. Like a person without a home."

Mary Ruth felt now was the moment to share one of her favorite Scripture passages with Sadie. "I've been wanting to tell you something that's helped me a lot during some of my darkest hours," she said, not waiting for her sister to respond. "It's from the Proverbs: 'Trust in the Lord with all thine heart;

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\ in I lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways

I i. I imvledge him, and he shall direct thy paths."

| N; ulie turned to face her, chin quivering. "I've heard those

] > i i-.cs before."

I "I)o you remember where?"

Sadie nodded. "From Mamma. She used to recite Scrip-

I lira while we cooked and baked together. I always wondered,

ihmigh, why some of her favorite Bible verses weren't ever

If, id Ml Preachin' service." "I wondered that, too." "Out in the Ohio church and later in Indiana the

piviu'hcrs stressed different verses than-they do here at home."

Mary Ruth listened with interest and then told how ter-

Ilihy she'd struggled at Elias Stoltzfus's funeral and how she'd

li 11;111 y found what she had longed for her whole life at a Menj In mile church, not so many days following his death. I "If it's divine guidance you're looking for, Sadie, it can be lli iiiiid in God's holy book." She went to her dresser and Ipii krd up the black leather Bible Dottie had given her as a L;iit, "Everything I need to live my life each day is right here." |Hic held the Bjfele close. "Sometimes I think I could simply Iftsul it instead of eating. That's how dear it is to me." I "Oh, Mary Ruth, bless your heart, you're cryin'." Sadie IfiMi'hed out her hand.

I "They're joyful tears," Mary Ruth confessed with a warm Iliuilc. Sadie's opening her heart, she thought, full of thanksIglving.

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Leah

.Leah awakened in the morning to the sound of fussing corning from Abe's bedroom. Quickly she scurried into her slippers and made her way down the hallway. When she looked in on Abe, he was all tangled up in his bedclothes, struggling to get loose. "Mamma, Mamma!" he was crying. "The room's spinnin' round and I'm stuck. I have to get out of bed."

Panic seized her heart and she sat down with him. "There, now, lie back, Abe. I'm here . . . just rest." She stroked his forehead gently, her other hand on his chest. His heart was pounding nearly out of his rib cage, and he was breathing ever so fast. "You'll be all right now. Take longer breaths . . . that's right. Jah."

Whatever had caused him so much turmoil this morning? She couldn't imagine, nevertheless she stayed right there with him till he quieted down enough to fall back to sleep.

He's exhausted, she thought, straightening the sheet and blankets, taking care not to awaken him. Dr. Schwartz had kindly suggested she bring Abe in for yet another checkup, and now she was determined to do so ... as soon as she felt

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11 milurtable taking him out in this cold weather.

She hurried back to her bedroom to dress, setting forth on her daily routine. Once her hair was twisted tightly on both liidt's iind the low bun at her neck was secure, she put on her hem I covering and went to her hope chest at the foot of her I'ril. There she located Sadie's delicate butterfly handkerchief. | She truly hoped she wasn't making a mistake in taking it In her sister today. Ever since Sadie's confession, Leah had | H Mulered the past Sadie's and her secret keeping. The whole I" nle of secrets had brought a world of hurt. Yet looking iiiiuully now at the pretty handkerchief, she couldn't be sure Iiiivv Sadie would respond to receiving this physical memory t>l her first dear baby's birth.

Is this the right time, Lord?

I Two hours before she was to arrive at the clinic for work,

It tNih could hardly wait to head off on foot to see Sadie. A

ljf!i"wing urgency to forgive compelled her along as her boots

Iplmliled through the snow. She felt she was carrying an

Ilinuecessary burden, and it was time to do what she knew she

jliiii',1 what she longed to do.

1 When Sadie flung wide the front door, Leah blurted,

1" \i h, sister, I just had to come see ya."

I Sadie's eyes narrowed and a brief frown creased her brow.

"(nine in, come in," she said after a moment, nearly pulling
El ih inside. "Here, let me take your wraps and mittens."
I "Denki, but I shouldn't be long." She sighed, hurrying
lInio the front room, following Sadie. "I miss ya so much," she
Ltnhl.

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Sadie's pretty eyes shimmered with tears. "Oh, Leah . . ." Sadie reached for her hand.

"I've come to say something else, too" Leah struggled to continue
"something that has been brewin' in my heart."

Sitting next to her on the settee, Sadie said, with trembling lower lip. "I'm awful sorry for what I did against you and Jonas, honestly I am. I don't deserve your forgiveness, Leah. It was plain awful to hurt you the way I did. The letter I took belonged to Jonas. ..." Her apology trailed away into a snuffle.

When at last Leah was able to speak, her voice sounded thin to her own ears. "Oh, Sadie, I do forgive you ... I do. I came here to set things right 'tween us."

At this Sadie seemed overwhelmed, her eyes welling up with tears. Leah drew her near, and they embraced with fond sisterly affection.

When they broke free, Leah was at a loss to know what to say. Second-guessing her plans to show Sadie the butterfly hankie, she wondered, Is this really the best time? Will it open new wounds for her?

Still searching for words, Leah said quickly, "Lydiann wanted me to tell ya hullo."

Sadie sighed. "And you say the same back for me, won't ya?"

" 'Course I will." Leah sat tall and straight uncomfortably so. "And I'm hopin' you'll think of askin' the bishop to forgive ya . . . soon, maybe?"

Sadie hesitated, and Leah feared she'd perhaps spoken out of turn. "I know 'tis an awful trying thing," Leah said.

Sadie nodded, and her words were soft and labored as she spoke. "I've heard tell best not say from whom that the

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I'i-iliivn may be payin' me a visit."

I .rail's heart rose at the thought. Gid's meeting with the I In.hop had accomplished something.

Siulic folded her hands. "Not so sure what I'll do 'bout it." "What do ya mean?"

"I daresay I don't deserve a second chance ... if that's what, the ministers are thinkin'."

Leah faced her. "Well, you surely didn't mean to get your'.' 11 in such a pickle, did ya?"

'T'rantly, I don't know what came over me, wantin' to Mii-jinler away from the house like that." Sadie paused. "I I in-viM" should've lied to you."

"This has all been so hard on you," Leah replied. "It'll be nil right. You'll see."

Sadie drew in a deep breath. "I thought comin' home

Would be easy somehow, but. . . oh, Leah, the memories are

everywhere for me. I thought they were buried in the past,

mill, . ." She nearly gasped. "Being here, I still think of my
I first baby ever so often. Is that so wrong?" Sadie wept softly
h"v, but her gaze held Leah's, as if a newfound trust was
in' vi'loping between them.

It is time, Leah thought hopefully. Touching Sadie's hand
I r< mi ly, Leah reached under her black apron. "I'm hopin' what

I l i.ivc here might help make ya feel some better." She took I In'in her
dress pocket a handkerchief. "I thought you might

w .me to have this back," she whispered, holding it up. | "Goodness me,"
said Sadie, obviously recognizing the cutI \vi 'i k embroidered butterfly.
"Isn't this . . . ?" I Leah nodded.

I Raising the white cotton hankie to her face, Sadie I hushed it against her
cheek. "Where on earth did ya find it?"

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"On the sidewalk leading to Dr. Schwartz's clinic."

"How'd it get there1," Sadie asked, appearing startled.

"I wondered that, too, but it looks as if Dr. Schwartz simply forgot to return
it followin' the night of your baby's . . ." There was no need to go on.

Sadie fingered the handkerchief lovingly. "Thank you ever so much, Leah.
"Tis the closest thing on earth to my wee son."

Leah was moved by Sadie's response, and she wished she'd returned the
hankie sooner perhaps upon Sadie's return home last fall. Still, she's happy
to have it now, and that's what matters.

Minutes later Dottie came in carrying a tray of goodies and hot cocoa. Leah rose and offered to help serve her sister. "No, that's all right. This is what I love to do," said Dottie, setting the large tray on a table near the settee.

"Thank you," Leah said.

"Jah, this'll hit the spot," Sadie added, the handkerchief laid out on her lap.

Dottie pointed to the hankie, a bright look of recognition in her eyes. "Well, now, that looks exactly like the embroidered hankie an acquaintance of mine had and lost."

Leah felt herself frown, but it was Sadie who spoke up. "Here, have a careful look-see," she offered, holding the handkerchief up for Dottie to inspect. "I have a feelin' you must be mistaken, 'cause if you'll look closely you'll see that this is one of a kind. Hannah made it especially for my sixteenth birthday."

Dottie touched the edges of the emerald green butterfly. "No, I'm quite sure I've seen this before today... or one exactly like it."

Dottie was so unyielding that for a moment Leah wanted

to tell her she was wrong.

Instead, she thought she'd seen it, but then they got to talking about the stitching and how Hannah must have a very handy hand to create such beauty.

"Fannie Mast pointed out some of the same lovely features on the butterfly hankie she had. A gift to her," Dottie said matter-of-factly.

Leah's eyes locked with hers. "Fannie, ya say?"

Dottie nodded. "She's an Amishwoman with a set of boykin' twins the same age as our Carl. Fannie had a hankie like this with her one day. I couldn't help noticing it when she was sitting in the waiting room at Dr. Schwartz's clinic with the twins, just as I was with Carl. We talked quite a lot, exchanged names, and got along famously, I must say." Here she laughed a

little, and then she told how she and Fannie had seen each other several other times since. "I purchased a bushel of apples from the Mast orchard this past fall. Real nice lulk, they are."

Leah felt slightly queasy hearing talk of her former beau's liimily.

"Did you say Fannie lost the handkerchief she had like ibis?" Sadie's question disturbed Leah's thoughts.

Dottie nodded, returning the handkerchief to Sadie. "Quite some time back."

"Well, there's only one like this, that's for sure," Sadie said pointedly.

For a fleeting moment, Leah wondered if this hankie was in fact Fannie's, especially since she'd found it lying on the sidewalk just outside the clinic door. Was it possible Cousin l;:iinie had dropped it on her way to a doctor visit? How couldthat be?

Yet the way Sadie was going on now with Dottie about

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this absolutely being Hannah's handiwork, Leah dismissed the notion that there could be two identical hankies. ;

"God be with you, sister," Leah whispered as she hugged Sadie good'bye. She was relieved to note her sister's spirits had greatly improved.

Outside, though, Leah was unable to forget Dottie's selfassured remarks about the butterfly hankie. No, I'm quite sureI've seen this before today, Dottie had said.

Impossible, thought Leah as she headed around the corner to Dr. Schwartz's clinic.

There she began by sweeping and cleaning the floors, and then moved on to dusting the furniture in the waiting area.

After a time she stopped her work and went to see if Dr. Schwartz was in his office. Along with Dottie's supposed memory of that same handkerchief, Leah had also been struck by Sadie's renewed grief for her first baby, born in Aunt Lizzie's former log house on the hill.

Till now Leah had rejected the notion of approaching Dr. Schwartz again on the subject, but today's visit had made her certain it might help Sadie if she knew her baby was buried in the vacant lot below the Peacheys' farmland. Why else would Dr. Schwartz tend the tiny grave?

Another recent storm had blown piles of snow against the north side of the clinic, and she could see the tops of drifts at eye level out the doctor's lone office window as she waited in the doorway. "Mind if I come in?" she asked. : "You certainly may, Leah." He pushed up his glasses and

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Vltlldlclcl ber for a moment. "How's Abe feeling now? Back to phonir

m "Not just yet, but Lydiann brings home plenty of school-MI'lv Id keep him out of mischief."

H "And the dizzy spells, have they lessened some?"

H "Not much just yet and it does worry me. He still has a Bit of confusion when he gets to talkin', too."

H' The doctor's eyes narrowed and he removed his glasses.

Hiring him in and I'll check him over for you. No charge."

He went on to ask about the follow-up tests made at the hos-

till. "Anything show up there?"

"Nothin' alarming," she told him. "But he doesn't yet Hknifinber a stitch of what happened that day, and it clearly fonoyoys him. His mind used to be ever so sharp."

B I)r. Schwartz assured her that the symptoms should diminKh over time. "I know it's difficult, but try to be patient and H|ep Abe as calm as you can."

Leah had to laugh. "Well, he's all boy, so that ain't an easy jtlk." They exchanged small talk for a bit; then Leah decided B nsk the thing plaguing her.

"I hesitate %o bring this up, really," she began. "It's just

11>;11 Sadie's strugglin' these days." She quickly explained as I >i 'Sl she could something of the Proving requirements and the burden they placed on her sister. When she revealed that ' i.ulie had temporarily moved in with the Nolts, he admitted

Mfi having already heard this news from his wife, Lorraine and

K

BpOttie having become good friends over the years. K "I hate to ask, but I wondered if it might not help Sadie ttlH'how to know. . . well, ever since I stumbled onto a little live on your property, I've wondered if, by chance, you ini|;lii've buried Sadie's baby there." ; : , ! ."

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He started at her words and his eyes squinted nearly shut. "What do you mean to imply?"

"I saw you clipping the grass in one small spot, tending to it, last spring."

The doctor rose suddenly. "You surely recall that your sister's baby was quite premature. You saw him yourself. There was simply no need for a burial."

"But . . . your car was parked nearby, and Lydiann and I saw you while we were walkin' back from Mamma's grave at the Amish cemetery."

His eyes avoided hers for a moment, and then he turned to face her. "What you saw was my attempt at dowsing for water." He indicated there was a small spring-fed pond on the same sweep of meadow not to mention Blackbird Pond behind the smithy's property, not so far away and he assumed there might be a well on his land. "And there is."

"But there was a grave ... I know it, for sure and for certain, she insisted."

The telephone rang just then, jolting her nerves, and the doctor excused himself, wasting no time rushing off to the receptionist's desk.

Alone now, Leah thought again about what she had seen that warm day, but she was fairly sure the doctor had not been carrying a forked water-witching stick. No, he had been down on all fours, working close to the ground. Was it possible he had the ability to simply use his hand to dowse for water?

If that were true, neither she nor Aunt Lizzie would want her to be in the employ of someone who had such powers. But since she didn't know for certain just what the doctor had been doing, she ought not be too hasty in judging this man who had been ever so kind to her. Still, the way he'd stood

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up so suddenly, as if taken aback by her question apparently iiiii.ions to answer the phone made her shiver, even though ilie room was plenty warm compared to the frigid weatheri Hiuloors.

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Oadie was truly astonished at Dat and Preacher Gid's unexpected visit two days after Leah's. The knock at the Nolts' door came midafternoon Friday, and she was thankful there was no one else in the house at the time.

Dat and Gid agreeably stepped inside when she opened the door and welcomed them, and her father got right to the point. "Our preacher, here, went to plead your case to the bishop this past week . . . and I'm mighty happy to tell ya, I believe his news to be ordained of the Lord God."

"What news?" she asked, eager to know.

Her father turned toward Gid and nodded his head, as if prompting him to reveal all. "Jah, 'tis true . . . it's something of a miracle, I'd have to say." He looked down at his black hat before continuing. "Seems the bishop's willin' to give ya another chance at the Proving, Sadie. But only if you come clean before the brethren."

Carefully she listened as Gid explained further. "The requirements will be even more rigid than before, and you must repent to three of the brethren the bishop, one preacher, and a deacon."

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I \\x went on to say that all this must be agreed to before iIn- new time of scrutiny would ever begin. If, and only if, ',11 lie agreed to adhere to this even stricter Proving, which \\v,r, in be extended to the beginning of June, instead of to the iniililli1 of April, she could return home.

Sadie could scarcely believe her ears. "A longer Proving,

v-i say

" 'Tis the price for disobedience."

She hung her head. "Jah, I was awful foolish."

(iid's face brightened, apparently heartened by her words. I i.i I, on the other hand, moved to her side, and she sensed his v,il lor what he'd taken as an admission of her guilt.

"So embarrassing all this is," she said, her mouth dry asi an be.

Hat's voice was thick with emotion when he said, "We'll welcome ya home with open arms . . . when the time comes."

She knew she could not now keep making offhand lemarks about getting a job out in the world. Truly, she did imi desire to leave her life with the People, even though her .Inhi rime in a^nodern house had been warm and wonderfull',in hI in many ways.

She reckoned Leah's return of the butterfly handkerchief In her to be a symbol of providence ahead. Something far lieyond her was calling her back to the straight and narrow, where she felt she might find peace if she simply did not fail in Iollowing the Old Ways.

The heavy snowfall partially obscured Leah's view as she w.iiched Dat and Gid from the kitchen window. The men

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cleared off the buried path to the woodshed, and then dug out the high drifts near the barn doors.

Soon here came Lydiann, piling on outdoor clothes, saying she was going out to help Dat "no matter how deep the snow," and with that was out the back door.

Red-cheeked Dat came in for some hot coffee after a while when Gid ran back up to his house for breakfast. With Lydiann still out in the snow, Leah and Dat found themselves alone in the toasty warm kitchen.

"I best be tellin' you first," he began.

Leah was struck by the radiance of his gray eyes, but she said not a word. "Somewhere along the way, I fell in love with Lizzie, and I plan to marry her come next Saturday." His gaze searched Leah's following this declaration. "I'm hopin' this won't come as a shock, nohow."

"I guess I'm not too surprised," she said, meaning it. "The twinkle in your eye for Aunt Lizzie has been perty obvious at times."

He nodded awkwardly as if there was much more he wanted to say.

"Goodness knows, I couldn't be happier for you two."

To this they both laughed. "Wanted you to know directly from me," Dat said, looking more serious again. "It'll affect you more than any of the others in the family, I 'spect."

She understood what he meant and held her breath as she waited for him to continue.

"Lydiann and Abe look to you as their mamma, which mustn't change a'tall because of this," Dat said. "You'll always be that to them. Wouldn't think of meddlin' with that, not one iota, and Lizzie agrees wholeheartedly."

She felt ever so grateful to this man who'd loved and shel-

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tfivj her as his own during her growing-up years, just as she was now doing for his children. To think he was planning to in,iny Leah's own natural mother. "Aw, Dat, you'll be ever so li.ippy with Lizzie," she found herself saying. "I know you will

l.r."

There was a merry light in Dat's eyes. "I'm awful glad I i,.; ,ic and I don't have to wait till fall to say our vows."

"Like the young folk."

He chuckled and added, "Bein' an old widower ain't so li;id when it comes to some things, jah?"

Leah went to the wood stove and poured him more coffee, ;iid he sat by the fire drinking it silently. Meanwhile, she I u sided upstairs to awaken young Abe as joy flooded her heart. She felt she ought to pinch herself at the thought of Aunt Lizzie becoming Dat's wife. At last dear Lizzie would have a husband of her own!

Monday morning Leah hurried upstairs after making the

11; in cake batter^and while waiting for the griddle to heat up. Through his doorway, she spied Abe sitting on the edge of his lu-d, looking up at her with squinting eyes, as if his vision was si ill blurred. "It's me, Abe," she said, going to sit next to him.

"I'm awful mixed up," he whispered.

"That's all right. The doctors say you'll get better each day, jah?"

"No, I mean'bout something else."

"Oh, what's that?"

He scratched his head, frowning to beat the band. "Just who's gonna be my mamma when Dat gets married again?"

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She smiled and put her arm around him. Dat had announced the happy news to the rest of the family at suppertime last night. "Well, I am, silly. Who'd ya think?"

He shook his head. "I can't figure out how that can be. Won't Aunt Lizzie become my mother?"

She could see how confusing all this would be, even without the lingering effects of a traumatic blow to the head. "Let me tell you again all about the day you were born, Abe."

"Jah, I'm all ears for that."

He settled against her, and she let him relax that way as she shared the precious things Mamma had said, even prayed, over her beautiful baby boy as he was entering the world and she was leaving it for heaven. "Mamma must've surely prayed a special blessing over you at your birth," she told him. "By the sweet look on her face as she lay dying, I believe she did."

"Our mamma loved us, ain't so?"

Leah nodded. She would always think of his mamma as her own and felt sure she was smiling down on all of them as they looked ahead to the happy wedding day.

Monday, January 21 Dear Diary,

I feel as if I must write down my feelings or sink deeper into despondency. Abe doesn't seem to be getting better quickly enough to suit anyone. Leah was here to see Mimi again yesterday afternoon, and she admitted to still being most anxious about him. I've thought of asking Gid to call for the hex doctor one day when Dat and Leah are away from the house, maybe, to put an end to this misery for poor Abe. For Leah, too. 1

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I luttr to think this, but I wonder if Dat's refusal to have the Am/.s/i doctor come hasn't been some sort of a curse on his I iui/v .son. Yet Gid doesn't think so when I talk to him of this, S though I can see he is as wide-eyed with worry as the rest of

I iin.

1 We've been awful careful not to discuss Abe's ailments in Ijynnt of our girls. Even so, the notion young Abe will never I /t right disturbs me round the clock. Maybe all this neverI ciuling worry comes from the baby blues I'm having something liHvful. I might just need a visit from the hex doctor myself. |()/i, J just don't know, really. Mary Ruth seems to think I I si u mid throw myself on the mercy of the Lord God, but I hon atly don't see how

her "saving grace" can help me. I Poor Gid isn't in control of his own household . . . much ! jt'.s.s the household of faith. But I really can't lessen the amount I r>/ tears I shed, sometimes for no real reason at all . . . though I / jeel just terrible when Gid comes home to find me in a heap Ian ihe floor, sobbing while I hold tiny Mimi as Ida Mae and I Ktttic Ann play. Is this what it feels like to lose one's mind, 1 I n'under?

I / must keep my tears in check for at least Dat and Lizzie's luvi/tiing. Gid's going to marry them in the front room at Dat's I linif.se. Since Dat's a widower and Lizzie, at age forty-five, is

1 much older than most brides, this will be a small gathering of % family and close friends.

I Plenty of changes will take place in the Ebersol Cottage lic/f/i this new marriage. Sadie has already returned home on

1 her best behavior and with the blessing of the bishop and will I move to the Dawdi Haus this next week to look after Dawdi l/nhn. Leah, of course, will stay put in the main house, ibecause she is helping raise Lydiann and Abe, who will have thud the love of three mothers in one lifetime. I Well, I best be tending to Mimi. Truly, her cries slice right

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through me at times I am startled, even put out by my own flesh and blood. Whatever is wrong with me? : ..:

Respectfully, ...

. . ,. :.. Hannah ;r;;;

The deep cold made itself known in the crunching creak of work boots on hard-packed snow as farmers headed for the barnyard, or in the solid thump of horses' hooves on wintry roads. A stiff northern wind swayed the towering trees in Abram's backyard as Gid made his way into the lower level of the bank barn, ready to shovel out the manure and redd up the stable.

Still ringing in his ears was the sound of Mimi's crying into the wee hours of this morning, and he wondered why it was that Ida Mae and Katie Ann had been such easy babies for Hannah to tend to. He recalled Hannah had actually been cheerful when the older girls were but newborns.

Picking up the shovel, he set to work, beginning the smelly yet needful job. All the while, he couldn't get his wife's gloominess out of his mind. The joy of motherhood had flown out the window with the arrival of Mimi. Nearly all Hannah wanted to talk about these days was one worry after another, concerns that revisited her during the dark night hours in her increasingly frequent nightmares.

Gid shoveled all the harder, glad for the quiet of the barn, not looking forward to returning to the log house for lunch. Fact was, he was often tempted to slip in at Abram's table and enjoy the peace of his father-in-law's house and Leah's tidy

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kitchen, come noon. Naturally he had never succumbed, always heading up the long mule road to the cabin where he'd imule a home with Hannah. It wasn't that he regretted his 'I mice in a bride Hannah had been his all in all, his everyliliK, from the first day he'd invited her for a ride in his 'lining buggy. He just wished he could somehow lessen her motional burden. Maybe tonight he'd offer to walk the floor null inconsolable and colicky Mimi, if necessary. A good nii;hl's sleep might be all Hannah needed, he thought. Either i li.il or a visit from one of the hex doctors. Jah, might just do

ill of us some good along about now, including young Abe.

He would have to check with Abram on this first, of

nurse, because Abram had not called for a sympathy healer ulirii it had been most critical. What had made Abram

lun^e his mind on something he'd long held important? Wi >i ilc) Abram, in fact, agree to set things right by having the li""i doctor come and work his

magic as should have been

I* >ue in the first place?

Just today Hannah had pleaded with him to ride for the pnwwow doctor not but four miles away. "Have him calm NI imi down with his potions or chanting. And me, too!" she'd

l h

! le recalled how uneasy he'd felt around the older man, I >"\v he could hardly wait to send him packing once Hannah's I'.ihy was born safe and sound. Never in his life had he felt i ii 11 a cold presence like a blue haze draped over all of them ii i i he room. He could remember only a handful of times as a I 'V being taken to visit the man with healing powers . . . and i inly by his father. Mamma would sooner have seen them all I i ish than summon the Hexedokder, he knew.

Thinking back on his breakfast conversation with flustered

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Hannah, he wondered how she'd gotten to the place where she so strongly desired help from powwwowing, especially since both her mother and Aunt Lizzie had resisted it.

That evening following supper, Gid offered to look after the girls. "Hannah, go 'n' rest a bit," he instructed, following her into the bedroom to make sure she did indeed lie down.

Hannah nodded, brushing tears away, and he pulled up a quilt to cover her, hoping she might be able to console herself in the silence of the room.

His wife had caused him alarm on plenty of other occasions if the ministers knew the full extent of her suffering, just how would it set with them? The preacher's wife was to be an example, not a hindrance to the People, so Gid must see to it that Hannah was surrounded with joyful folk like Leah, Aunt

Lizzie, and his own mother and sisters. There was plenty of support awaiting Hannah . . . and himself.

Meanwhile Gid had his first wedding to prepare for, and after morning milking tomorrow, he must pay another visit to the bishop about the procedure. The thought of yet another face-to-face talk with the man of God put a chill in his bones, especially after the grueling encounter he'd borne on behalf of Sadie, but there was no putting it off. Abram Ebersol was mighty eager to wed, and the bride-to-be was happily willing.

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JLvenh heard Lizzie stirring next door in the Dawdi Haus midriinrning Tuesday. She could see the top of her aunt's head in .ir the cookstove in the cozy kitchen, where she found

I i ',ic leaning down to remove a large sheet of chocolate-chip nil>kies from the oven. On the way over, she'd noticed the In ml room was empty. Dawdi John must be upstairs resting, she divided.

"(. ">h, hullo," Aunt Lizzie said, noticing her right then. I .c;ih joined*sher as Lizzie sat at the table to scoop warm i' ikies from the cookie sheet with a spatula, carefully placing

I1 ii'in to cool on brown paper. "They smell wonderful-gut," i In- said.

"Your father's favorite, ain't so?" Aunt Lizzie smiled |iin;idly as she mentioned Dat.

L Leah breathed in the tempting aroma. "I'll wait till they out a bit before having a taste. But I'm having only one." P "Ach, goodness, you could stand to eat a whole handful." i I i '..ie eyed her curiously. "You ain't tryin' to lose weight, now,

In all reality, Leah hadn't gained a single pound in more than ten years; she had been cutting her dress and apron patterns the exact same size since she was coming into her time of rumschpringe. "I just best not be eatin' more than one" was all she said.

"Some sugar will do ya gut," Aunt Lizzie pressed.

"Makes me droopy after a time, though." Leah supposed it did that way with many people. She'd noticed the same in Lydiann when she ate lots of cookies in one sitting or had too much cake or pie. Lydiann had a surge of energy too much, really and then she'd become whiny and worn out. The same wasn't true of Abe, though. Like Dawdi John, he could eat and eat desserts and never be bothered.

"We'll have plenty of goodies and pies and things for the wedding," Aunt Lizzie spoke up. "I've asked Miriam and your aunt Mary Ebersol to help with the baking."

Leah's ears perked up. "I didn't realize there would be more than just the immediate family invited."

Lizzie broke out in a wide smile. "Abram and I got to talkin' and we changed our minds 'bout that. Peachey's Smitty and Miriam will come, as well as most of your father's siblings. I've mailed handwritten invitations to my brother Noah and his wife, Becky, as well as all my siblings over in Hickory Hollow. We'll see who shows up." Suddenly her smile grew a bit cunning. "I even stuck my neck out and invited Peter and Fannie Mast."

"What on earth?" Leah couldn't believe her ears. "They'll never show their faces, ya know."

"No, prob'ly not. But we can keep extendin' the hand of friendship."

Leah wondered if her father had been in favor of this, but

he was more interested in something else. "Since most people don't know about you and me bein' mother and miinghter, I've been wonderin' what we Sadie, Hannah, and jKl:iiy Ruth oughta call ya, once you and Dat are wed."

I "Well, now, I'll always be Aunt Lizzie to you girls, I'm Sllimkin'. Lydiann and Abe, too, of course." Lizzie's eyes nar- ll'ttwi'd. "Did ya have something in mind?"

I To this Leah had to smile. "I wondered if Dat might want Ills lo call you Mamma, out of respect, maybe." She paused. "I doubt any of us would mind that, but. . ."

I Lizzie patted her face. "Nothing much 'tween you and me li u your sisters and me will change when I marry your father. I'luTe'll always be a shoulder to cry on and plenty of love to kii round. No need to alter any of that, right?"

I Leah could feel herself relax a bit; she had wanted to Ilimior Lizzie as her father's new wife, yet she longed to keep JNc|i:irate the special place dear Mamma still held in her heart.

I Hannah dropped off Ida Mae and Katie Ann at the llVacheys', eager to slip away from the house and go with Mimi to visit one of the hex doctors. She'd gotten to thinking Ilkii perhaps all* her ceaseless worrying about everyone and Ipvi-rything was more her problem, really something unique ||m her. She seemed to turn near all the little things in the life Inl her family,

immediate and otherwise, into an overwhelming mnyysiick of issues. As she had tried to rest last night between iMinii's bouts of colic, she couldn't stop thinking about wantIfh)! lo fall asleep forever, never to wake up. She didn't know wvliy she would think such a thing, when it would appear she ftm! the kind of life any Amishwoman would envy a Ihiindsome, kind, and loving husband and three beautiful little kii k's. So what was wrong?

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Well, she was on her way to find out, and with baby Mimi tucked snugly in a makeshift cloth carryall next to her on the buggy seat. Hannah rode as fast as she could to the only woman powwow doctor in the area: Old Lady Henner, as old as Gobbler's Knob itself, some said.

Hannah's mental road map proved to be absolutely accurate, even though she had visited this doctor only one other time in her life. The place was a quiet and unassuming white three-room cottage, set back from the road and lined on either side by lilac bushes and other flowering shrubs, which, as she recalled, were always more abundant in blossoms than any others in the area come springtime.

She made her way up the short walkway and, holding her baby near, she rapped on the screen door, heart pounding as she did so. The elderly woman hobbled to within a few feet of the door and waved her in, not bothering to come and open it, almost as if she'd been expecting her.

"I hope it's all right to visit today," Hannah ventured.

"Come in, come in." The white-haired woman nodded. "What can I do for ya, Hannah?"

"I'm here for help with three ailments," she replied, thinking of the troubles of baby Miriam, herself, and her brother.

The nearly toothless woman gave a swift smile and peered into the small basket where Mimi, miraculously, was fast asleep. "Oh . . . you've brought

your littlest one. Well, now, she looks something like your husband, ain't so?"

Hannah readily agreed. "She has Gid's eyes and hair."

"Ah, our youthful preacher. . ." The old woman looked at her, gray eyes cloudy, and Hannah wondered if she might be going blind. "This one's got herself a quick temper, and so

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mini young at that. Ain't that a big reason why you've

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I human removed Mimi from the basket. "I'd hoped Miri mi wasn't a bad seed, so to speak. I'd hoped she simply had Inn)' bout with the colic."

The old woman leaned hard on her gnarled walking stick mil hacked up and lowered herself into a rocking chair. I -low," she sighed, "give the wee babe to me."

1 lannah lowered Mimi into the old woman's frail arms ii id lap. She wasn't exactly sure what Old Lady Henner began i > softly utter while holding sweet, sleeping Mimi, but the si it iri chant sounded mighty strange.

As she finished, the baby's eyes flew open, and Mimi icached her tiny hand up to the old woman's face and cooed

11intently.

"Now, then, Hannah, what can I do for you?"

Reaching down, Hannah picked up Mimi and placed her h;u k in the basket, noticing how limp her daughter felt. Uuickly she turned back to the old woman. "I'm afraid I have i lie mother fits, and there just ain't anything to stop 'em." She Mniggled withihe lump in her throat. "Honestly I think I uii^ht be losin' my mind some days."

The old woman looked up at her. "I'll see to all of that. I Xin't you worry your perty little head." And Old Lady Heniht motioned for Hannah to sit cross-legged at her feet.

Eager for relief from the gloom that tenaciously enveloped her, Hannah went willingly to the floor and sat like a child, closing her eyes.

When the chanting was through, Hannah felt so relaxed she wanted to stay sitting there, without budging an inch.

But Old Lady Henner was eager to move ahead to the

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third ailment, so Hannah began to describe Abe's symptoms as best she could.

Then, for the longest time, the older woman squeezed her eyes shut, concentrating on something, her lips moving slowly. . . silently. After a while, though, she opened her eyes and shook her head, wearing a look of consternation. "Ach, I'm havin' me an awful time breakin' through for Abe, no matter how hard I try."

Hannah found this to be ever so peculiar, as she'd never heard of such a thing. Evidently Old Lady Henner's powers were fading with her age, but Hannah said not a word about that.

Abram swallowed his intense nervousness. He had never before thought of doing what he'd just done. The strongest urging had come to him from the Lord God, he felt certain. "What do ya think of me placin' my hands on Abe's head to pray for him?" he'd asked Leah.

"For his healing, ya mean?" Leah's hazel eyes had shone.

He had nodded, reverently whispering the Scripture he'd committed to memory: "They shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover...."

With Leah accompanying him, they had gone to Abe's room. There, Dat had knelt beside Abe's bed, placing his hands on his sleeping son, and fervently prayed, "O Lord God and heavenly Father, I come before you to ask for my son's healing, in the name of your Son, the Lord Jesus. . . ."

It was Abe who broke the news to Leah, just as she was encouraging him to lie down for an afternoon rest, following

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11ii- noon meal. She had been thinking about all the school-

1, .ik lydiann was gladly carrying home each day for her Ij I "'Iher, worried the boy might never catch up, even a little

11 11fill t'liat he might lose a year and have to be held back. I 'lie doubted Dat would ever hear of such a thing, not for his I l<iit(hl-eyed and smart son, and she wouldn't let herself cross I i Lit' bridge till the time came. Truth was, Abe was a deterI iniled sort of youngster. He'd not only survived the struggle I n| Ms own difficult birth, but he was pronounced to be "as I limlfliy as they come" by Annie, the Amish midwife some-

11ilug for which Leah was grateful each day.

I "1 can see better today," Abe told her as they headed up I ilir arnirs.

Leah noticed his speech was less garbled, too. "Of course,

'ii're gettin' better. I knew you would." She followed him to

In. room and stood in the doorway, wanting to share with him I li.il Adah had said in the hospital, that with God all things

u. it- possible. "Our heavenly Father's lookin' after you," she

111 'li| him. "I've been askin' almighty God to heal you. Dat has,

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He looked at her quizzically. "Ya talk to the Lord God I'll meet me? 'Bout my hurt head?"

She couldn't help herself; he was such a dear boy. She

leaned to his side and squeezed him good. "Of course I do.

'You're the apple of His eye, just as you are your earthly

father's."

When she released him, he looked up at her, his eyes firmly focused. "God must care for me an awful lot." "I'd have to say that's ever so true." She pulled back the linen and top coverlet on his bed, and Abe climbed in, having already removed his shoes. "By takin' it easy and not complain-

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ing, I believe you're doin' your part. Now let the Lord do the rest."

He smiled up at her from beneath the blankets. "You're downright smart," he said. "I'm glad you're my mamma."

She leaned over and kissed his forehead gently. "Have a nice sleep now, ya hear?"

Tiptoeing out of the room, she smiled at Abe's sweet remark, ever so glad God had given her the opportunity to care for him and Lydiann. Glad, too, that Sadie was back home and would be on hand for Dat and Lizzie's wedding. She dearly hoped Hannah would be able to attend, as well Leah was deeply concerned about her sister's present mental state.

Heading to the kitchen to begin preparing supper, she wondered if, like Hannah, Lorraine Schwartz might not also be a melancholy sort of person. There had been times when, upon entering a room, she'd discovered Lorraine's eyes red, a handkerchief in her hand. Leah's heart went out to her and Hannah both. It seemed to her there was much to be joyful about in life,

but obviously Lorraine didn't see it that way, at least not since her younger son had forsaken his family. As for Hannah, she had every reason in the world to be happy.

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Blushing a bit and wearing her new blue cape dress, Aunt Lizzie stood before Preacher Gid on Saturday morning with Dat near and looking sober yet happy in his clean black Sunday trousers and coat. The front room of the Ebersol Cottage was packed to the windowpanes with wedding guests. Leah watched and listened ever so closely, not wanting to miss a single word as Dat and Lizzie promised "nevermore to depart

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Rum each other," but to faithfully care for and cherish each lit her, fill that time when the dear Lord God should separate linn by death.

I Leiih sat between Sadie and Lydiann, glad to see such a wi'Kt' gathering of folk on hand to witness the wedding ser'

11'. , iiware of the sunny faces of Dat's relatives and a good In 111y of Lizzie's, too most coming by horse and sleigh I" . .11 isc the roads were packed with plenty of new snow. Sadie |v i- all smiles today, too, a sight Leah hadn't seen in some I inn , although she and her sister had enjoyed a long heart-to|i< hi lallc upon her return, when Sadie shared that she was Kuli iH lo see it through this Proving "no matter what. I won't jjiNiipoint my family or God this time." Glancing at her lluw, Leah reached for her dear sister's hand as the People flu i'.m to sing in unison three wedding hymns from the Auslinni/.

I The one and only thing to cast a faint cloud over the day Iv i. i he obvious absence of the Masts, though neither Leah In n Lizzie nor Dat especially had expected Mamma's cousin io grace them with their presence this day of days. I Whe the time came Bishop Bontrager rose and took I'llnicher Gid's spot before Dat and Lizzie. He placed his big Btu ids over theirs and solemnly recited, "I say to you: the God f Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob be

present with you and aid you liul carry out His blessing abundantly upon you, through Jesus I'I nisi. Amen."

I ' I 'hoy were pronounced husband and wife moments later, In. I Leah found herself thinking right then of the mother ItL'>M raised her. Oh, Mamma, if you're looking down on all of Us >unv, surely you know how happy Dat is this wonderful-good

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Lydiann looked up at her, eyes glistening. "This holy moment is ever so special, ain't so?"

Reaching over, Leah clasped her darling girl's hand and nodded slightly. Lord willing, there were not too many more years before young Lyddie and Abe would also be standing before the brethren with the dear young man and woman of their choosing, waiting to say their lifelong vows before God and the People.

Jah, not so many years hence, thought Leah through joyful tears.

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To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion,
to give unto them beauty for ashes,
the oil of joy for mourning,
the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness;
that they might be called trees of righteousness,

the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified.

Isaiah 61:3203

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I he sky was barely light and every bird in Gobbler's Knob wn.i warming up for a grand daybreak chorus when Lydiann I untied downstairs, hoping to make it to the kitchen before ill her Mamma or Aunt Lizzie awakened. She wanted to surpi Isc the family this morning with a great big breakfast, which Wjiic was planning to cook all by herself. K Hver since her sixteenth birthday last week, Lydiann had BlCii planning the breakfast, this being the day before her lii M over Sundsty singing. After all, if she met the right boy ' "' in, it wouldn't be too many years from now she'd be cookini: in her own kitchen. She and Mamma had been talking dl ' ml this season of her life for quite some time now, Mamma i in ouraging her to simply "have fun during rumschpringe I'fi acquainted with plenty of nice fellas."

In other words, don't settle doum too quickly with one boy and Ymh into getting serious.

I .ydiann knew Mamma's intended message, all right. It was inniv rhan clear where she was going with her concerns. After nil, having babies out of wedlock seemed to run in the family,

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and, well, she wasn't going to make such a mistake with her life. Mamma and Aunt Lizzie both had nothing at all to worry about, as she'd told them in so many words. Maybe more words than necessary, truly.

As for Dat, he wanted to get his say in, too, what with all his talk of "now, make sure Abe's the one to be takin' ya to the barn singing come Sunday night." Her first time at a singing was turning into a family concern definitely not the way things were supposed to be.

Sighing, she contemplated all of this over the sizzling skillet, ready to pour fresh eggs and milk, mixed together and salted, into the pan. Naturally, once she did begin seeing different boys, coming home with them in their spanking-new courting buggies, not a soul under Dat's roof would be privy to anything at all. She just hoped she could tell the difference between a nice boy and one who wasn't so nice. Mamma had talked with her about some of the telltale signs to look for, one being about the way a young man looked at a girl.

She'd felt she had seen the right kind of look in Carl Nolt's eyes over the years, having attended the Georgetown School with him and all until two years ago, when she finished up eighth grade and came home to work alongside Mamma, Sadie, and Aunt Lizzie. Carl had long since forgiven her for her bold remarks about his adoption and happily gone off to high school, because there was no limit put on education by the Mennonites. She knew this from Mary Ruth, who was quite content to have married her preacher husband, Robert Schwartz, three years ago a bride for the first time at the age of twenty-seven, of all things! The happy couple was living in a small rental house between Quarryville and Gobbler's Knob, and Mary Ruth was teaching Sunday school at

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in the church where Robert was the associate minister, as well as in (inducting a weekly home-quilting class while waiting for their first baby, due in late October.

Setting the table and hearing footsteps in the bedroom directly above the kitchen, Lydiann was aware of Aunt Lizzie and Dat just getting up. She scurried about, hurrying the pace

through her preparations, recalling as she worked how Dawdi John used to make hints about what a good Amish boy was supposed to look, sound, and act

like . . . but that was more than . i year ago, before he passed on to Glory. With only the memi ury of her wise grandfather to cherish, she hoped and prayed .lie might remember everything of utmost importance now I hut she was courting age and "ripe for the pickin'."

/ do hope to have a wonderful-good time, she thought, lookIng ahead to tomorrow's singing, to be held near Grasshopper level. .-. :<:

Abram rose out of a deep sleep, stumbling across the room

11 ward his work clothes hanging on the wooden peg rack high i >n the wall. Such heavy slumbers stupors, really always hit him this time%f year. He sensed it was going to be one of the warmest days of May thus far, with not a hint of a breeze corning in through the open windows. The dawn felt balmier than iiny in recent weeks.

Quickly dressing, he looked at Lizzie, still asleep. He I (tinned to himself and went over and poked her till she was ;iwake. "I smell ham and eggs already." He chuckled, watching her drowsy face as she slowly opened one eye and then the i >i her. "Best be gettin' up, or someone's gonna replace you as I he breakfast cook," he teased, then leaned down and kissed I he tip of her nose.

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; "I must've overslept," she said softly, stretching now.

He nodded. "And all well 'n' gut, since we had something of a late night, didn't we?"

"Oh, Abram." She sat up with a big smile on her pretty face, and then reached for the pillow as he backed away. She flung it straight at him anyway.

He tossed the pillow back and, when she caught it and leaned backward onto the bed, he hurried over to her and planted kisses all over her face. "Lizzie, Lizzie . . . look what you've gone and done to me. I feel like a young buck again." These years with his second wife had been joyful ones,

despite a few ups and downs. He was altogether surprised they'd gotten along as well as they had, considering the many tiffs they'd had over the years they'd known each other. Lizzie, still his dear bride at fifty-one, kept him smiling, and he would have told almost any John Zook on the street how grateful he was to be so happily married at the ripe old age of fifty-nine.

Of course, there was more to happiness than being with someone who made you feel the way Lizzie did. If only Ida could see him now, she'd be amazed at his spiritual transformation, as well. She'd be ever so joyful to see the answer to her many prayers, he thought. Truth was, he and Lizzie were followers of the Lord Jesus in every respect, though they did not parade or air their beliefs. His own faith had helped him to accept Mary Ruth's choice of the Mennonite life . . . and husband. Sure, he wished she'd stayed Amish and married a good man right here amongst the People, but Mary Ruth and Robert delighted in walking with the Lord, adhering to the teachings of His Word, and holding firm to the assurance of salvation all frowned upon by Bishop Bontrager and others in the Amish church here. Yet such strong faith could be found

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Hillionp; rhe People, Abram's own having come about because nl lilu, initially. Truly, the Holy Spirit had been at work in his llle nil those years.

I With a lump in her throat and a sense of foreboding, Leah I IlochI at the edge of the walkway, waving as thirteen-year-old IA he drove Lydiann to her first singing. She wasn't certain just I how long she held up her hand in a somewhat motionless I Wave, but when the horse and carriage reached the end of the Hiinc and made the turn west, she realized her arm was still |hlj, (h over her head. Goodness me, she thought, feeling like a

I persnickety mother hen at thirty-two, worrying her head over

II yilinnn. But she knew why she felt so hesitant about Lydiann liiiUTing the time of rumschprunge her darling girl was liilinosr too eager to meet boys and begin her courtship years.

I Dear Lord, be with her always, Leah prayed, wondering if

1(1 ir might not just stand here and wait for Abe to return from this brotherly duty. Still, she did not wish to behave the way Aunt Lizzie had when Leah and her sisters were courting age, although she knew Lizzie had meant well. She refused to get too caught up in guessing who was seeing whom, even in jest. I treat Lydiann with respect and trust, the way Aunt Lizzie always did. Mid me, she decided then and there.

I Turning toward the house, she felt nearly exhausted. (Without a word to either Sadie or Aunt Lizzie, she hurried through the kitchen and to the stairs. She had long since purchased her own Bible, not wanting to borrow Mamma's once again and Lizzie had begun to read aloud from it every day, as well as from the old German Bible downstairs in the kitchen.

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The latter was still used for evening and morning family prayers, which, not surprisingly, Dad insisted on doing without fail.

In the quiet of her room, having moved back to her childhood bedroom years ago when Dad first married Aunt Lizzie, Leah settled into the chair near the window. Opening her Bible to Psalm Thirty-four, she read silently, I sought the Lord, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears.

Again she read the fourth verse, wanting to memorize it... realizing how essential it was for her to do so. I must give Lydiann and her running-around years to you, Lord. She made a conscious effort not to fret another minute from now until the wee hours, when Lydiann would be escorted home by her first beau, whoever that might be.

From where she was working in her little kitchen, Hannah couldn't hear everything being said in the front room, but she'd caught several words and sentences that almost made her wish she'd heard nothing at all. Dad and the bishop were talking about trading Gobbler's Knob young men for some in Ohio. She'd heard tell of switching boys between St. Joseph, Missouri, and places in Pennsylvania for the purpose of bringing fresh blood into the various Amish church districts, but never had she thought such a thing

would happen here in Gobbler's Knob. All the same, she knew of several recent instances where babies had been born with severe physical or mental problems because of close intermarrying. As for her own healthy threesome, she and Gid both thanked the Good Lord daily for them, even though she wished she might conceive another child one day soon.

Just now, though, she wanted to inch forward and hear

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Blind on earth Gid was helping the bishop plan for some poor, unsuspecting souls more than a dozen fellows, is what she'd thought she had heard. But she resisted the temptation and forgot about making a cake for supper, glad that the girls were off to school and nowhere around to hear the kind of talk their teacher father was involved in. More and more, Gid was succumbing to Bishop Bontrager's spell. It was as if the bishop were God himself to Gid these days no matter what the elder man said, her husband seemed to go along with it. The strangest thing, really, especially since Gid had always been his own man when it came to opinions. Mixing the flour, sugar, and baking powder for the cream cake and filling, Hannah contemplated what such a trade of heaven might have meant for her had Gid been offered such an adventure. A chill ran up her spine and she shook her head. (For pity's sake," she whispered.

| When she heard the front door close an altogether odd occurrence when everyone else entered by way of the back door she kept busy with her cake and hoped Gid might just wander out to chat with her. Much to her surprise, he did,

though remarkably he seemed to be refraining from any church talk with her.

"Makin' supper?" he asked, avoiding her eyes.

She nodded, not so eager to say a word, hoping he

wouldn't realize she'd overheard bits and pieces. "Bishop's downright worried," Gid said. Not as worried as I am, she thought. "He thinks what he wants to do might cause a real stir

iiinongst the People." Gid went and stood by the back-door window overlooking the flower beds she and the girls had planted not too many weeks ago. ,

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"Oh?" .

; Gid came right out and asked her, "Did ya happen to hear any of what we talked 'bout?"

"Only a little."

Gid turned and came to sit at the table, where he watched her blend together an egg, some cornstarch, and milk for the filling. "I can't stand up to him on anything," he admitted. "He has such a powerful way 'bout him. There's just no gettin' through to the man."

"The man of God," she said softly.

"Jah, exactly. How do ya deal with that?" He went on to say exactly what the bishop wanted to do: that he was mighty eager to bring new men into this close-knit community. By the time Gid finished, his hands were over his face, covering his eyes. "This'll bring such heartache to our families. I can't begin to say. . ."

She felt the pain for those boys Gid had just mentioned. "Sweethearts will be torn apart, too, no doubt."

"Jah, with all of them courtin'-age fellas." He rose and went into the front room again without saying another word.

'Tis an awful sad day for the People, Hannah decided then and there, knowing, if the bishop had made his choice, nothing could halt the course of those boys' lives.

An idea popped into her head just then, and she left her cake batter to hurry to Gid's side. "Why not make the tradin' something the boys could choose to do? Appeal to the adventuresome, maybe. Wouldn't that make much better sense than makin' it required?"

Gid was studying her face now, reaching out to embrace

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her. "That's a wonderful-gut idea, Hannah. This may be just the answer!" He kissed her cheek and then released her to rush out the back door, no doubt hoping to catch up with the bishop.

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1 hat's a right perty sight," Sadie said as she and Abe rode together to market in nearby Bartville on the first day of summer. She motioned to the colorful arrangement of petunias around a large birdbath as they passed one farmhouse.

"Do ya know who lives there?" asked Abe, gawking over his shoulder as they passed.

"Somebody with a green thumb, that's who." She had to laugh, thinking about Aunt Lizzie's amazing talent for coaxing flowers of all colors and

kinds to flourish under her tender

"You've got yourself a green thumb, Sadie."

"That's awful nice of you."

"Well, 'tis true." Abe grinned at her.

It was good of her brother to offer to ride along and help her sell the produce and other items today while Lydiann and Hannah's older girls, Ida Mae and Katie Ann, tended the roadside stand at home. "We'll bring in a gut amount of money for all our work today, Lord willin'."

Abe nodded and hopped down out of the buggy, going to tie up the horse.

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Sometimes she couldn't get over the kind and generous helper Abe was. His accident on Blackbird Pond all those years back had worried everyone nearly sick, especially Hannah, but it was clear there was nothing at all wrong with him now.

Abe was quick to unload plenty of fresh-from-the-farm vegetables, including Swiss chard and snap peas. There were also baked goods, dried nuts, and homemade tartar sauce from Aunt Lizzie, along with pepper jam, corn relish, and handdipped candles from Leah. Hannah had sent along embroidered handkerchiefs and table linens, and Sadie had canned chowchow and home-cooked stews. Everyone had pitched in the past few days to make this Saturday market day an extra good one.

Sadie was glad they'd gotten themselves settled in long before customers began to arrive. She had always liked to get there well ahead of time, allowing ample opportunity to chat with other standholders, most of them farmers' daughters and wives.

Among the newcomers were several youth from the Grasshopper Level area. One in particular who seemed to hit it off with Abe was a tall and slender young man with dark hair several aisles over from them. Being an

outgoing fellow, Abe had gone wandering up and down the rows during a few lulls in the normally steady stream of buyers, talking to nearly everyone at each of the produce tables. Sadie couldn't see if the dark-headed young man was tending his table alone, but she certainly heard his catching laughter and, in the midst of all the marketplace chatter, she thought she heard Abe's, as well. \

This is good, she thought, having been a little concerned,

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along with Leah and Aunt Lizzie, that Abe had been spending far too much time with Carl Nolt rather than other Plain boys.

When the volume of customers picked up again, here came Abe once more, rushing back to help Sadie, taking charge of hand selling and making change. Between custom' ers, Abe mentioned the young man across the way, saying he'd given Abe a homemade peppermint stick made by his twin sister.

"How interesting," Sadie said, lowering her voice so as not to be heard by anyone but Abe. "You might not know this, but Mary Ruth may be having twins come fall."

"Ya don't mean it." Abe laughed. "I might have both a nephew and a niece?"

"Or two of either," she replied.

"Ain't it 'bout time Dat had himself a grandson? Goodness knows how much he'd like that!"

Sadie thought yet again of Dat's one and only grandson thus far, gone to heaven sixteen long years ago. It still surprised her how often she thought of that wee boy, all shriveled and blue, never having made a single sound, not even a whimper. Yet she loved him, he and his stillborn half sisters ... all

being cared for in heaven by Mamma, Harvey, and Dawdi John. And the angels, too, she supposed, because Aunt Lizzie had always said God's ministering servants cared for the babies who went to Glory before their parents. "Jah, maybe Mary Ruth will give Dat a grandson or two," she replied, standing to greet the next customer.

"That'd be right nice," Abe replied.

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When the end of the day came and it was time to say j;<H>d-bye to the folk on either side of their table, Abe suggested Sadie go with him to meet his new friend. "No, that's .ill right. I don't have to meet all your friends, for goodness' sake," she said, feeling suddenly shy. Having observed from ;il'nr the way the two boys had gotten along, talking animatedly together, she didn't feel the need to barge in, and she told Abe so.

"But, Sadie, you'd like him. He's the nicest fella and downright easygoing." Abe motioned with his head, nearly insisting Sadie walk over there with him.

"All right, then," she agreed. "If ya do all the talkin'."

Abe said he would, and he led her to the almost empty long table. "This is my oldest sister, Sadie," Abe said. Then, I timing to Sadie, he said, "Meet my friend Jacob."

The handsome teen reached out a firm hand and shook hers. "Hullo, Sadie. Most folks call me Jake."

She smiled, surprised by his relaxed manner, just as Abe li;id described. "Nice to meet you, Jake."

Grinning at them both, Jacob volunteered that his nextoldest and twin sisters had gone to Central Market in Lancasu-r today, so he'd offered to come tend to the table here. "Tending stand ain't what I do best, though," he said, the color rising in his face. "I'd much rather help my father in our iipple orchard."

Suddenly, at that moment, everything clicked. This must be Peter and Fannie Mast's boy, she thought. If so, he was right now talking to the cousins his own father had chosen to shun. Well, she didn't dare spoil things for Abe she simply acted as if she had innocently met an acquaintance of her brother's.

Yet all during the ride home, Sadie couldn't get Jake's

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enormous dark eyes and his winning smile out of her mind. He reminded her of someone. A young man in the Millersburg, Ohio, church years ago, perhaps? And there was a certain resemblance to big brother Jonas, too. "Have ya ever met Jake before today?" she asked.

"Seems to me I did, maybe, quite a while back. But honestly, I can't remember where." Abe looked at her curiously. "Did you think you knew him from somewhere?"

She leaned back in the buggy seat, glad Abe held the reins to the horse. "Well, maybe so. Was it that obvious to you?"

He nodded, grinning. "You just were starin' at him," he admitted. "I felt a bit embarrassed, truth be known."

She didn't want to blurt out that they'd just run into Peter Mast's youngest son at least she hadn't heard that Cousin Fannie had ever birthed more children after her fraternal boygirl twins, but how would she know? Peter and Fannie had cut themselves off from the tiny world of Gobbler's Knob simply because the Abram Ebersol family lived there.

"I'd hate to embarrass my handsome little brother," she said, reaching up and touching his blond hair.

"Ach, keep your hands to yourself," he said playfully and clicked his tongue, urging the horse to a trot.

She laughed, glad to be heading home even as the memory of Jake's countenance stirred up bewildering feelings.

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A nesting robin in the nearby maple tree sang with such clarity, Mary Ruth raised her head from the feather pillow, hearkening to its call. She was keenly aware this morning of the early bird's song, so anxious was she to greet the day. This

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day! How long had it been since her last Sisters' Day? She had been passed over far too long, yet she understood and had no business questioning why Sadie and Leah Hannah too had not included her at Adah Peachey Ebersol's and others' homes for canning bees and work frolics. A lingering sadness had pricked her heart, though she'd never shared any of this with her husband, who now lay asleep next to her. It was obvious why she had been treated so in the past.

It had been years now since Gid had taken it upon himself to ask her to stop coming to his household's little log home. Naturally Dat had felt she had done wrong in leaving her Old Order Amish life behind, yet she knew there was no benefit in rethinking any of that, especially when she would never give up her precious beliefs. Still, she did feel like not only an outcast from the community of the People, but also somewhat estranged from her family especially her twin. Hannah was not behind the decision by Gid, Mary Ruth was sure, for she often saw the look of sorrow in her sister's eyes when at the Ebersol Cottage, where she was permitted to visit with Hannah and the rest of her family. "Just never talk with Hannah alone," Gj^l had said privately, making things heartbreakingly clear that day so long ago.

So the invitation to attend Sisters' Day at Leah's best friend's place was something of a breakthrough, at least in Mary Ruth's mind. Her heart was

gladdened at the thought of seeing her sisters and Aunt Lizzie all in the same kitchen working together.

Getting up quietly so as not to awaken Robert, she gently placed a hand on her stomach and walked downstairs to the kitchen, turning her thoughts to the baby, possibly more than one, growing inside her. She offered a prayer for the safe and

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normal development of this, their first little one. Or two. And she prayed she might be a cheerful blessing today as she attended the work frolic, sharing in all the talk that grown women married and single alike seemed able to prattle on about on such a fine late-June day.

As the sun was breaking over a dark string of trees, Lydiann hurried outside, barefoot and still wearing her nightclothes. She'd awakened with a hankering to spend some time with their new German-shepherd pups, especially sleek and pretty Boo, who reminded her quite a bit of their former dog Sassy. Lydiann sometimes still missed Blackie, King, and Sassy, who'd lived out their lifespans a few years before, but Dat had been eager for more dogs, so they'd purchased another two from Brother Gid.

Presently, Boo was making high-pitched sounds, the way some dogs did when a storm was brewing. Seemed to her that dogs could hear storms in the distance long before people Dat had always said as much. It had to do with more than their keen hearing; perhaps they had a special sense for such things. From Boo's behavior, Lydiann was ever so sure there'd be a thunderstorm later that day. She just hoped the weather cooperated with her handsome beau's plans for them to meet down Georgetown Road in his open buggy. But knowing him, she was quite sure he'd have the forethought to bring along an umbrella, though if the weather was too bad, he simply wouldn't show up. He had thought ahead the last time they'd gone riding in his courting buggy, reaching down and pulling an umbrella out from beneath the front seat just before the

glist droplets of rain fell on them.

Lydia (Mi, she could just pinch herself with all this happiness, Having met such a wonderful boy at her first-ever Sunday kinging back in May. It had been obvious he'd had no interest in any of the other girls that lovely evening. In fact, after her ride home in his open carriage that night, she hadn't really liked any of the other boys at the following singings, Still though she was sure they were awful nice and fine looking, too. Already she and Jake had seen each other more times than she could count on one hand, which was quite frequent. Even though that courting couples were really only supposed to see each other every other Sunday night at barn singings and the piiturday nights in between those usually four times a month. But here it was only one month later and she'd nearly lost track of how many moonlit buggy rides they'd enjoyed. I She and Jake Mast had done a good job of keeping their pudding romance hush-hush difficult to do when many of the young people whispered behind each other's backs about who was seeing whom. But Jake and she were exceedingly cautious, and it was a good thing, too, since neither of them had ever dated and they were, as Dad would surely say, too young to settle down just yet. Of course, there was also the prickly matter that Jake's family had chosen to shun her family. Jake had overheard his older sister Becky telling someone exactly that. Just why this was, Lydiann had no idea, In it she took comfort in Jake's emphatic determination to continue seeing her, no matter what. "We'll get my father's Blessing in due time," he'd told her recently.

1 "There ya be, Boo," Lydiann said, discovering the noisy pig in the warm hay of the stable area, not but a few feet from

1)110 of the two milk cows, as if he thought he was a new calf.

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"What on earth are you doin' whining and fussin' out here? Is a storm comin', do ya think?"

The pup looked up at her with kindly eyes as she knelt next to him, rubbing his neck under his ears. His eyes instantly glazed over as if with pleasure, and she smiled. "You're no help at all!" In a bit she got up and went in search of Brownie.

One of the mules neighed loudly as she moved through the lower level of the barn, which was already warming with the dawn of a new day. It'll be a hot one today, she decided, still searching for Mamma Leah's favorite of the two dogs. In fact, just last night Mamma had talked about what a gift of joy all their pets had been both past and present. Secretly, though, Lydiann wondered if Mamma Leah didn't prefer cats to dogs now, since especially the barn kittens seemed ever so drawn to her.

When she finally located Brownie, he was standing up and pointing his nose toward the north like a living compass. She had to laugh, slapping her leg through her cotton nightgown and robe. "Come here," she said. "You're a silly one." But she knew she'd found her weather forecaster. "It is gonna storm today, ain't so?"

Brownie looked up at her as if he were smiling his answer. "I'll take along my shawl tonight, then ... in case you're right," she said, deciding it was high time to hurry back to the house and dress for the day before Dat and Abe came trotting out to the barn for milking. What would they think if they found her in her nightclothes, of all things?

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"V_/f course I do," Leah answered when, following breakfast, Lydiann asked her if she remembered her own running-around

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years.

"Then, why are ya worried'bout me, Mamma?" ;

Leah paused. Had she mistakenly given that impression to her dear girl, or was it actually true? Was she too concerned nhout all the nights Lydiann was leaving the house after dusk mid returning home before dawn? Too much like Sadie's wild days, she had been thinking, hoping Lyddie hadn't met some Knglish boy somewhere. She felt she ought to ask, though, just for good measure. "You're not seein' fancy boys, are ya?"

Lyddie's eyes grew wide at the question. "For goodness' sake, Mamma, what would give ya that idea?"

She didn't want to say she'd had a nagging feeling, but she | did wonder how on earth Mamma had faced four daughters' limes of rumschpringe. Truly, she felt sympathetic for any mother with a courting-age daughter.

! "There are rules to be followed during the running-around years, Lyddie." She reached for her hand. "Spendin' time with

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a boy following Sunday singings is all well and good. But ya shouldn't see each other too often otherwise."

"But what does it hurt to see each other more than that?" The light of love, or something close to it, was evident on Lydiann's sweet face.

Leah's heart sank. Just what I've worried about. "Ach, dear one, I daresay you're a bit young to get serious."

Lyddie's brow knit into a frown. "But didn't you like a boy long before you were sixteen? Sadie told me so once when we were up in the high meadow last spring, gathering willow twigs to weave into wreaths." She stopped a moment. "I ... I hope I'm not speakin' out of turn, Mamma. You fell in love when you were young, didn't ya?"

This moment Leah wondered why on earth she hadn't gone along to the pastureland when Sadie had invited her that day. What had she been thinking, allowing Lydiann to go off for hours alone with Sadie? She gathered herself, torn between her present feelings and what she knew she ought to be saying about all of this. It wasn't really Sadie's fault that such a sensitive topic had come up. Better Jonas and her romantic tale than for Sadie to have revealed hers with Derry Schwartz.

"Mamma, you all right?" Lydiann asked, staring at her.

"Oh sure, I'm fine. And about bein' in love and all... I'd have to say it was such a long time ago I've nearly forgotten." But she had not forgotten how much she'd loved Jonas . . . and how she'd felt the autumn day Sadie had revealed he was not the man her sister had married after all. Leah honestly believed she might never forget the bolt of shock that had ripped through her upon hearing the stunning news.

"Do ya remember how it felt when the first boy you ever

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li >ved reached for your hand and held it for miles on end?" I ydi;inn's words were coated with honey, but it didn't make I hem any more pleasant for Leah to hear.

Lyddie and her beau are farther along than I thought. . . .

"Oh, Lydiann, I oughta remind ya to be ever so careful. I)on't fall too quick, too soon."

"Fall?" Lyddie gasped. "You make it sound dangerous, Mamma. Don't ya trust me?"

Of course she did she had believed in her heart that Lyddie was eager for romantic love, though perhaps not the kind that involved devotion and commitment to one person for a lifetime. Leah tried to explain the difference, saying all the things Mamma and Aunt Lizzie had told her back when she' turned sixteen.

At one point Lydiann seemed a bit peeved, and Leah couldn't help but worry this time of courtship might cause a rift between herself and her girl. Well, she would move heaven and earth to make sure that didn't happen. If it meant stepping back and praying about it more, she'd do that. The last Lydiann was willing and almost excited to discuss such

Things was a comfort, a reminder they indeed had as close a mother-daughter relationship now as always. Leah earnestly desired to preserve their good relationship until such a time as the two of them would become equals. More than any-

thing, it was essential for her to keep the talk flowing. She must attempt to keep an open mind, as well try to know and understand what Lydiann was thinking, if at all possible, even though the People expected the courting years to be secretive.

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Just as their dogs had seemed to indicate earlier, the weather began to change around midafternoon, and a storm blew up. Lydiann watched the gale from her bedroom window, high on the second floor in what had been Hannah and Mary Ruth's bedroom when they were her age. She observed the storm whip the row of maples lining the pasture and lift and twirl the barnyard dust. A single bird flew for cover, heading home to the four-sided birdhouse Dad had erected.

Let nature get this out of her system, thought Lydiann, not happy about the prospect of meeting her beau in the midst of such a gust and rain. Surely, though, this fast-moving storm would pass by nightfall. She hoped so, because she wanted so much to ride next to him, talking into the wee hours. And who would've thought she'd like the first boy she'd ever spent time with. Well, that wasn't necessarily true, because she'd developed something of a crush on Carl Nolt a few years ago, and he on her, too. Discussing their differences, his being Mennonite and all, had made for several long walks between his house and hers, but no one in her family knew about them. She'd always felt she wouldn't be happy if she wasn't Amish, unlike Mary Ruth, who seemed to thrive in the Mennonite church.

But since Lydiann had met Jake, there had been very little space in her mind or her heart for Carl or for remembering fondly their school years together or his once-frequent visits. Truth was, Carl was the sort of fellow whom any girl might enjoy having as a kind of brother, but she couldn't imagine feeling about him the way she did about Jake, who was not only good-looking and fun-loving, but able to look at her with an expression that made her heart melt but good. She didn't know if falling in love was supposed to feel this way, but

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scarcely could she wait to ride through the night with Jake, elderly listening to his voice, feeling secure and ever so happy while leaning her head on his shoulder, her heart nearly bursting

// this blustery weather continues, Jake won't come for me, she thought sadly. They'd made this agreement early on since i here was no way for him to contact her beforehand. So she si if down on her bed and prayed, asking the Lord God to bring ii swift end to the wind and rain, dearly hoping she might see her beau this night.

The busyness of the Sisters' Day work frolic in Adah's kitchen was a welcome relief to Mary Ruth. Beginning at inidmornning the group of women had gathered at Adah's to put up canned peas. She worked alongside her twin and tenyear-old Ida Mae, pleased to have this time with Hannah and her oldest girl. She listened intently as her sister shared some of her daughters' latest antics, all the while happily anticipating the souHsd of children in her own home.

"Katie Ann's been collectin' butterflies lately," Hannah said. "Gid and I can't figure out how she catches them without damaging their wings, but she does. And she's got herself quite a collection now."

Ida Mae nodded, her blue eyes smiling. "You oughta see if, Aunt Mary Ruth. Ach, I wish you could . . ."

By the sound of things, evidently young Ida Mae wished her auntie might be allowed to visit their home. Mary Ruth was drawn to Ida's demure face and strawberry blond hair. So similar to Hannah's, she thought, wondering whom her baby

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or babies might favor in looks.

"I'll ask Dat if you can come up to the house after the frolic, maybe," said Ida Mae.

To this Hannah frowned quickly and changed the subject. "Where's Lydiann today?"

"Best be askin' Leah," said Mary Ruth. "I thought for sure she'd come, but she may be workin' with Dat."

"She sure seems to like workin' with the barn animals," Hannah replied. "She's a lot like Leah was at that age."

Mary Ruth hadn't thought of that before, but she could certainly see what Hannah meant. Lydiann did love the outdoors, and she liked working alongside Dat and Gid, too, though she hardly did so as often as Leah had.

"I, for one, am glad to keep my girls round the house, especially these summer months," Hannah said, smiling warmly at her Ida Mae as she reached for another jar.

"Not so much falls on your shoulders now, right?" Mary Ruth said.

Hannah nodded. "It's lots more fun, too, than when they're off at school all day long."

Feeling suddenly dizzy, Mary Ruth went to wash her hands at the sink, then stepped outdoors for a breath of fresh air.

Leah wished Lydiann had come along to the Sisters' Day work bee, but she hadn't pressed the issue. If Lyddie wanted to stay behind and help Dat in the barn and the fields, then so be it. Still, she couldn't help but think Lyddie was probably daydreaming about her beau again, though she mustn't let herself get caught up in anxiety over Lydiann's rumschprunge.

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long before Mamma had died, before she'd ever asked Leah to bring up Lydiann and Abe as her own, Leah had often contemplated notions of fate and a person's destiny, wondering if it was possible that a single spoken word or one misdeed could change the course of a person's future. She wasn't so sure about such farfetched youthful thoughts these days. All the same, the notion lingered in the back of her mind that she must step lightly where things of the heart were concerned.

She worked alongside Sadie, Adah, and Adah's younger sister, Dorcas, trying her best to think about other things. She was thankful when Dorcas began telling how her young sons had been going on "adventures," as she

put it. "They're havin' ibemselves a great time roamin' the acres, goin' exploring. But yesterday Little Joe wandered off alone and, when he did finally come home, he said he'd found what looked to be a little grave."

Leah perked up her ears.

"Where on earth was it?" Sadie asked, looking quite surprised.

"Wasn't on^Pop's property, that's for sure ... it was south of us, a way over on that vacant lot. Honestly I think Little Joe must be dreamin' but gut."

Leah had sometimes wondered if someone else might also discover the grave one day. After all, it had been years and years since she and Jonas had first discovered what had then been a tiny mound, clearly trimmed of grass, although they were sure, at the time, that it was simply the well-tended plot of a beloved pet. But Dr. Schwartz had denied it was a grave altogether.

"Little Joe was both upset and confused, truth be told,"

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Dorcas was saying. "He couldn't understand why the plot wasn't in the cemetery."

Sadie spoke up. "Best be tellin' Little Joe not to worry. No need to, really, is there?"

Dorcas shrugged her shoulders. "It bothered him . . . 'twas clear."

"Why's that, do ya think?" Hannah asked, having come over just in time to overhear the conversation.

"Not being in the cemetery, for one. And he said he saw flowers on it, like someone had just been there," replied Dorcas.

So Dr. Schwartz did lie to me when I asked, Leah thought, knowing he was the only one who knew the truth. In her heart, she knew she must approach him on this again; this time she would refuse to let him pull the wool over her eyes. Dowsing for water, indeed!

The night air was good and fresh from the earlier storm, and Lydiann was delighted to be sitting next to Jake in his open buggy. "I almost thought we might not see each other tonight, what with the rain 'n' all."

He looked at her, eyes smiling his pleasure. "I'm mighty glad it stopped, too."

They talked about the next singing and how his twin sister, Mandie, had been asking him who he was seeing. "But Mandie's easy to distract," he said, "what with her interested in a couple of boys. I think we can keep her from finding out about us till the time is right."

"Do ya know who the boys are?" she asked.

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He bobbed his head. "I have an idea, but I could be wrong."

"Your twin sister mustn't want you to know her business, I hen?"

He laughed softly. "Ya might say that."

They rode quietly, passing a good many roadside vegetable stands, all of them cleared off for the night. "Ever notice how busy the roads get this time of year?" she said. "They're nearly ;i public marketplace during daylight hours."

"Well, jah, and isn't it gut for the Plain families up and down Georgetown Road?"

"I don't mind tendin' vegetable stand, but it does get awful hot out there of an afternoon. And there's never a lull, if seems."

"When you're my bride, I'll see to it you have a nice big awning over our roadside stand," he said.

Stunned, she wondered if she'd heard him right. Had he just said what she thought that he hoped to marry her?

Jake turned to look at her, and then reached over to touch her face. "I didn't scare ya, did I, Lydiann?"

To be truthful, she had been a bit taken aback by his boldness. "My mamma would be concerned." She paused, thinking she needed to say more. "And ... I think it's best we ... well, be careful not to get too close, ya know."

He smiled. "I understand, Lyddie. But I want you to think 'bout us being together soon . . . getting married."

None of her family would be much in favor of their wedding anytime soon, particularly since she and Jake were both only sixteen. ,

"Don't ya think we oughta wait a while before sayin' our

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vows?" she asked softly, trying to think the way Mamma would want her to right now.

"I knew when I first laid eyes on ya that you were the girl for me. If you feel the same way 'bout me, why should we wait?"

"I do like you, too, Jake. A lot," she replied, enjoying the nearness of him.

His smile returned. "Well, I happen to love you, Lydiann. And I want to marry you come wedding season."

She was further surprised by his outspoken announcement. "Ya mean, this year?"

"In five months ... an eternity away, wouldn't you say?"

With them having come along this far in just one month, four more months of courting might seem like forever, especially if they kept taking so many nighttime buggy rides.

"This has all come up so quick," she whispered. "Mind if I think on it?"

"You've got yourself, say, ten minutes?" He was grinning to beat the band.

She knew he was teasing her now and was glad for the sweet smell left by the rain and the sounds of chirping insects as they rode under the stars and half moon. If she felt the way she did after such a short time as Jake's girlfriend, how on earth would she feel about him by November's wedding season? Deep in her heart, Lydiann was sure she knew the answer. She already loved him dearly, for sure and for certain.

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I ciur father says the bishop's got somethin' up his sleeve for some of the menfolk," Aunt Lizzie told Leah as they rolled out pie dough the day following the work frolic. They'd decided to use up the rhubarb on hand and make a dozen sirawberry-rhubarb pies to be served at the common meal following Preaching service tomorrow at Jesse Ebersol's house.

"Oh?"

"An unusual plan, really... to help bring new blood into our community And it doesn't seem to be a big secret. At least Abram didn't say it was."

Leah couldn't believe her ears when she heard what was supposed to happen before the harvest young men from Lancaster County were being swapped with a few from I lolmes County, Ohio. "This sounds outlandish. Who'd ever llink of goin' along with it?"

Aunt Lizzie raised her eyebrows. "Evidently it's up to individual families which boys go and which stay." ,

Leah shook her head. "I doubt there'll be anyone volunteering, truly." , , -,

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"Well, Gid's all for the idea." Lizzie looked up just then, staring right through Leah. " 'Tween you and me, there's no way he'll stand up to the bishop." Lizzie didn't continue; she let her expression finish her thought.

Leah wondered if this had all come about because of several babies born with severe handicaps in the past few years. . . and more than a handful with webbed feet, too. She shivered. "Maybe tradin' men isn't such a bad idea, really," she found herself saying.

"Well, no, I can understand the why of it. But think of the heartbreak. . . boys leavin' their families behind only to marry and settle down in a new, faraway place."

Like Jonas. It astonished her that she would suddenly think of him as a prime example. "Obviously the boys who've already joined church won't go, right?"

"Bishop Bontrager wouldn't think of doin' away with his own ruling. Those baptized boys'll stay put or the Bann would be sure to follow."

Very few churches held to such strict guidelines, Leah knew. She was just glad she hadn't ever had any desire to leave the Gobbler's Knob community, wanting to honor her vow not only because of the bishop's decision, but because she loved her dear family and the People here.

While cleaning up after the Sunday common meal in Aunt Mary Ebersol's kitchen, Leah overheard several older women talking. One particularly gray-haired M.ammi was saying something about "so-and-so livin' under the shadow of another's sorrow." When the woman turned and caught Leah's

rye, she hushed up right quick, looking the other way.

Surely they're not talking about me! But as she minded her own business and helped dry the many plates, she couldn't get the comment she'd heard out of her mind. Do the People think I'm living under the gloom of Sadie's less-than-spotless life? For Hire and for certain, they could take one look at her and know she was as happy as any mother around here. All the same, the idea of folk whispering about her made her feel uneasy. Were the two older women feeling sorry for her? Did they happen to know of her former connection to Jonas Mast or, huler, to Gid?

Leah couldn't abide the notion of anyone's feeling unwarranted sympathy for her, especially when more than any-

thing, she had been determined to be joyful in all she did, crying her family under God all these years. There was no need for such a thing to be whispered, yet she felt sure the

thing had been about her, otherwise why the embarrassed I. .ok?

Fact was, she was as delighted to be alive as the next person. She was glad to be witnessing the maturing love between Dat and Aunt Lizzie, for one, as well as the love between Hannah and Mary Ruth and their spouses. If there was any fret showing on her face, she figured it had to do with raising two teenagers at the moment. Lydiann was out all hours and moping around like a love-sick puppy, of all things, and Abe was feeling his *lonesome* because Dat had allowed him to go with a group of older boys on a lark, raising a bit of tomfoolery at Root's Country Market.

Even so, the older woman's remark plagued Leah all the way home. She honestly didn't feel alone or lonely, neither

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one. Surrounded by the extended family she loved so dearly, there was scarcely any time to feel that way.

Once home Leah decided to take the horse and carriage out for a drive, to give herself some quiet time. It would have made sense to simply turn around a full mile or so after she passed the Nolts' and Schwartzes' places, but she felt inclined to drift along on this pleasant and sunny Sunday afternoon, letting the horse pull her farther, not caring where she was headed. For certain, Dat might eventually begin to wonder where the world she'd taken herself off to, but for now she had plenty of time.

Sighing, she leaned back in the buggy seat and watched the clouds float by, feeling nearly as light as a chicken feather. She contemplated the sermons today, having heard similar ones, if not the same, from Bishop Bontrager more times than she could count. But lately Preacher Gid's were somewhat more interesting to her, and she wondered if he'd gotten to reading the Holy Bible, maybe. Since he spent so much time around Dat, that might be a possibility, what with Dat reading God's Word twice a day and even studying it. So just maybe some of that was rubbing off on their young preacher unbeknownst to the bishop, naturally.

She might have turned around about then and headed home, but she saw two young people walking her way. Without meaning to, she found herself staring at the boy and girl as they walked, who turned now and then to glance at each other and smile or laugh. The girl was shorter than the boy, and Leah might've guessed them to be twins except that the

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Hill was quite blond in comparison to the young man, who had deep brown hair.

As they approached the horse and buggy, she waved to

them and they waved back, calling out a greeting to her. "Wie is dat?" the boy said, smiling and raising his straw hat. His hue seemed rather familiar.

"Good day for walkin', jah?"

"The way from Grasshopper Level is all uphill to here," I if called. "But the return trip is much easier."

She slowed the horse, pulling onto the dirt shoulder.

"Are ya goin' far yet?" asked the girl.

"Looks like your horse is awful hot," the boy said, briefly lunching the bridle.

At that moment she recognized them. "Say, aren't you lake and Mandie Mast?"

"I thought ya seemed a mite familiar, too," Jake said with a quick look at his sister. "Didn't we meet once over at Dr. Schwartz's clinic? A long time ago, seems now."

"What a keen memory you have," she said. "And jah, it's rvcr so nice to see the both of you again."

"Same her*," Mandie replied politely, appearing rather shy.

"I always wondered why we never bumped into you and your family again," Jake spoke up, glancing a bit sheepishly at Mandie. "But when I asked Mamma, she said you were the .sort of folk who kept to home."

Homebodies, baloney! Leah thought sadly, quite sure the I wins knew more than they were saying about their father's imposed shun of the Ebersols.

"Well, have yourselves a nice afternoon walk. I guess Ioughta be goin' now." , .. ; , .. ::;

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"So long!" Jake called to her.

"Good-bye, Cousin!" Mandie said.

Even once the horse started moving again and she got him turned around in the narrow road, Leah could scarcely stop looking after the Mast twins.

Something's terribly familiar about Jake. . . .

But she decided it was her memory of his childish face that tugged at her so, and as she rode farther away from the chance meeting, she felt quite sure that Jacob Mast must simply remind her of his father.

Leah wasted no time Monday morning, after the laundry was washed and hung out to dry, heading off to work on foot. Once at the clinic, she went promptly to the waiting room and stood before the lineup of framed photographs on the wall. One in particular caught her eye Derek Schwartz wearing a sports uniform and holding a baseball bat.

She sucked in her breath as she stared at his face. If she remembered yesterday's encounter correctly, Jake Mast and Derry Schwartz were nearly twins in looks.

But how can that be

She thought back to the last time she'd seen Peter Mast, recalling his dark brown hair and distinct jawline. Both were akin to Jake's hair and the shape of his mouth and chin.

I'm borrowing trouble, she thought and set to dry-mopping the floors.

Dr. Schwartz noticed Leah standing in the waiting room, intently looking at a picture of his son Derek. That in itself

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wasn't so odd, perhaps, but her facial expression was one of discovery. He was well aware of the pounding of his own heart, his nerves suddenly on edge.

Turning from the doorway, he hurried back to his private office, closed the door, and began to pace. Would Leah approach him with more questions?

No longer could he attempt to fool himself into thinking his deceitful plan was forever safe. On a subconscious level he had been in a state of perpetual worry for these sixteen years Sunday mornings spent tending the tiny grave, hoping to atone for this, his worst sin. Yet had he purposely set himself up to be found out? Putting flowers on an obvious

I gave . . .

Did he, in all actuality, long to be found out, the crime dealt with . . . himself punished?

If Leah was as bright a woman as she had thus far proven herself to be, not telling how long before she'd put two and two together. Or maybe she already had. What had he been thinking bringing her into his circle of acquaintances, hiring her to work for him, allowing Lorraine to put her to work as part-time housekeeper? She had even seen Derek in the flesh one Christmas quite a few years back. To think he had been remiss, even reckless, in protecting his awful secret.

The logic behind the treacherous deed he had committed now completely escaped him. Hadn't he thought it best to protect his good name?

What good name? he thought, sick with self-disgust.

A wave of dread seized him and he leaned over, resting on his desk. Breathe, Henry . . . take slow, deep breaths.

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Mary Ruth perked up her ears when her father-in-law brought up the subject of his land Monday evening at supper. "It's a nice big property south of the Peacheys' farm," he said. "If ever you were thinking of building a house for your growing family, Robert and now's as good a time as any it would be ideal." He paused a second, his eyes blinking fast as he continued. "I'd like

to offer you this as a gift. . . since your first child is on the way. We could begin excavating right away."

"Why, Dad, this is a surprise," Robert said, eyes wide at the news.

Lorraine spoke up next. "Your father and I have been talking this over for some time now."

Mary Ruth enjoyed watching Robert's handsome face light up at the prospect of owning land and a house, but he quickly went on to say they were comfortable in their small rental home for now.

"Well, if you should ever decide otherwise . . ." his father said.

"We appreciate the offer," Robert assured him.

Mary Ruth agreed. "What a lovely thing to contemplate for our future." She imagined Henry and Lorraine both were hoping for more than the one or two grandchildren they were expecting, and their growing family could surely use morespace in years to come. , .;. . , , ...,

On the drive home, Robert slipped his arm around Mary Ruth. "You know we probably won't take my father up on his generous offer, don't you?" .. ,
...,.....

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She was amazed at his response. "Whatever do you

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"I'm not interested in handouts, even from my father."

"Your parents mean well, Robert."

"All the same, we will make our own way, under God. I led strongly about this, dear."

She could understand Robert's position well enough ;liter all, she had been raised with a strong work ethic, too. It In id been one of the things that attracted her to Robert in the hrst place. Her husband studied the Scriptures diligently his lirsi calling also putting great care into his second job of planting trees and shrubs, beautifully landscaping folks' yards.A preacher and a gardener both till the soil, in a manner of speak' inn.

Smiling, she shared the thought with him.

"Well, aren't you clever?" He gave her shoulder a quick squeeze as he drove.

"Would you marry this Amish girl again if you had the chance?" she teased.

"In a minute I would. And, by the way, you aren't so Amish anymore." :

She smiled back at him. "Oh, I don't know about that.: They say, 'once Amish, always Amish,' you know."

While Lydiann helped Leah clear the supper dishes, she mentioned having met a girl named Mandie Mast at the singing the night before. "She's the same girl we met years back, Mamma, over at Dr. Schwartz's clinic. I remember her so

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clearly because her eyes are blue as can be. Do ya know who I'm talking 'bout?"

Leah nodded. "Jah, I believe I do." She found Lydiann's comment about Mandie to be rather curious, because there were too many times when Lyddie simply could not keep track of having fed the chickens of a morning, let alone recall something that had happened years before.

Lyddie went on. "Mandie said she and her twin brother happened to see you out ridin' yesterday afternoon. So she must've remembered you, too."

"I stopped the horse and talked with them a bit, jah." She didn't divulge Jake's comment about the Ebersols keeping "to home," though, or how

peevish she had felt at hearing Fannie's untruthful explanation.

"Anyway, Mandie told me the most interesting thing."

Leah braced herself for some remark about the rejection Mamma's cousins had made of all of them.

"Mandie said her and Jake's birthdays aren't on the same date, even though they're twins. Isn't that downright peculiar?"

Lyddie had her there. "Whatever do ya mean, dear?"

"Mandie was born a few minutes before midnight on April ninth . . . and Jake came along in the wee hours the next day, so his birthday is April tenth." Lydiann laughed softly. "Now, what do ya think of that? Bein' twins but not havin' the same birthday."

April ninth?

"Are ya awful sure of this?" Leah asked, her pulse pounding in her temples.

Lydiann appeared confused. "I have no reason to think Mandie's lyin'." . . .

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"No ... I didn't mean . . ."

So . . . is Aandie and Jake were born mere hours after Sadie's first baby. The thought tormented Leah, and she couldn't stop her brain from spinning, her mind on her encounter with Cousin Fannie's twins yesterday afternoon how she'd fixed her gaze on Jake, nearly staring a hole in him. He did not resemble Mandie; she recalled he never had, even as an infant. In fact, he didn't much resemble any of his brothers or sisters, though he did remind her of Peter Mast. . . but only if she thought enough about it.

Helplessly she thought of Jake's nearly black eyes . . . identical to the eyes that haunted her from a recently framed photo of Derek Schwartz as a teen, a favorite of Lorraine's she'd pulled out of an old scrapbook. Leah had

dusted it weekly for the past few months, aware of her resentment each time she considered again what he'd done to Sadie ... to all (if them).

The news of Sadie's baby that he was our grandson would have caused Lorraine tremendous sadness . . . even embarrassment, Dr. Schwartz had told Leah years before.

Once again she contemplated Jake's dark eyes and shock of hair. But she shook herself and hoped she was imagining things.

That night Leah lay still in her bed, reliving the meeting with the Mast twins. She thought of the striking similarities between Jake and the new photo of Derek, as well as those of his childhood photos she'd been dusting in the front room of the Schwartz home these years.

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Tired as she was, she let her mind wander into a whirl. Lyddie's comments about the Mast twins' birthdays had gotten her all stirred up.

In her drowsy yet troubled state, Leah suddenly recalled the butterfly handkerchief Sadie had used to cover her dead baby's face after his premature delivery and the strange comments Dottie Nolt had made about it years ago, upon its return to Sadie. Hannah had made only one such cutwork embroidered handkerchief, yet Dottie had said she'd seen Fannie Mast with one exactly like it. Was there in fact only one handkerchief. . . and had Fannie dropped it at the clinic, where it was retrieved by Leah?

Was it possible Sadie's baby had not died at all? Could it be that he was actually alive? She had seen his lifeless blue body with her own eyes. Had she been deceived? But Dr. Schwartz had left so quickly. . . and why was that?

Leah knew she must pay a private visit to Dr. Schwartz at the next opportunity there would be no getting around the truth this time. She would not budge from his clinic all night if it took that to get his attention ... or Lorraine's. She would do what she had to in order to drag an honest answer out of the doctor. She would give it her Amish best.

She tossed about in bed, dreadfully aware of Sadie, probably asleep now in the Dawdi Haus. If any of what she suspected was true . . . Poor, dear Sadie

On the other hand, Leah thought, what if she were completely wrong? Until she knew the truth, she dared not share her misgivings with anyone, even in speculation.

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Prom time to time, Jonas ventured out and away from his woodworking shop, especially on auction days like today or hen stifling afternoon temperatures and high humidity made ii nearly impossible to keep his mind on his work. Today he'd

1.1ken himself off to the neighboring town of Berlin, where, due to the sale in town, he knew there'd be plenty of farmers i in^regating at Boyd and Worthman's Restaurant and Gen-

1'iul Store for a grand slice of pie, if not a generous lunch to i'o with it. A|. breakfast he had kindly asked Emma not to I ml her packing him a sack lunch as he'd had it in his mind i lin! he wanted a chance to chew the fat a bit, needing some mule- companionship.

I \v paid the Mennonite driver quickly when he was let i nit ill the stoplight on the main street, and then he headed i ill on foot toward the old restaurant that looked out onto the i' mil. Inside he found a good many Amishmen already feeding ihcir faces. Glancing about, he happened to see young I'readier Solomon Raber, or Sol for short. At only thirtyiliree, the newly ordained preacher was as pleasant a man as

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any he knew, with a contagious smile and big brown eyes.

"Hullo, Jonas!" Sol called to him, leaning up out of his chair a bit at a table not so far from the long wooden counter. "Come 'n' join us."

Jonas nodded and hurried to take the only vacant seat with the preacher and two of his friends, Gravy Dan Miller and Peach Orchard Levi Troyer, their nicknames distinguishing them from the dozens of other Dan Millers and Levi Troyers in the area. "Hullo," Jonas said, removing his straw hat. "What's gut on the menu today?"

"Oh, just everything." Sol tapped the sandwich section of the menu. "Like hot beef with some broth to dip it in?" He fairly grinned at the suggestion.

"Sounds fine to me." Jonas put down the menu, not bothering to look at the price or even what came with the sandwich.

They began to talk of the weather and local happenings, but when Sol commented, "I've heard tell of more than a handful of our young men volunteering to move to Pennsylvania," Jonas paid close attention.

"Just what do ya mean?" he asked.

"Well, now," Preacher Sol explained, "I guess one of the old bishops back east got this crazy idea to trade some of his boys with ours."

Jonas scratched his head, trying to recall if ever he'd heard of such a thing. "Whatever for?"

"Guess there's been too much intermarrying the blood's gettin' weak or something, and it's affecting babies."

Gravy Dan nodded and spoke up. "Same thing's goin' on in some places out here, too. That's what happens when a fella falls for his first cousin and marries her, I 'spect."

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"It's a little more sense to me," Peach Orchard Levi said, his face flushing red at the sensitivity of the topic, no doubt.

Innas hardly knew what to make of the idea. "So a few of our young boys plan to go to Pennsylvania and marry and settle down, in exchange for the same number of fellas from back

. Here

"More than a dozen are comin' here," Sol said, "from our place in Lancaster County."

/(Oleaster . . . The mere mention of the area set his mind in reeling. So many years had come and gone since he'd laid eyes on Leah Ebersol. . . Abram's Leah. And his parents and his old grandparents were they even still alive? His brothers and sisters... all the happy days, growing up and helping his father in the apple orchard, working the soil, preparing for market day week after week in the summer, the harvest and his cider making. Remembering the beckoning smell of homemade applesauce, he felt he was right back in his mother's kitchen at this moment, even while he sat here in the heart of Holmes County, Ohio, in this wonderful-good restaurant catering to Plain folk.

He retraced the steps of his boyhood and teen years. Leah had been such a big part of those growing-up days, and for a moment, he found himself reflecting on her warm and pleasing laugh, her gentle smile nearly constant, it had become.

Although such memories were not improper, he refused to dwell on the past. His life was more than happy here. He had made the best choice for his future.

Still, the thought of young men passing between the states as a way to bring in fresh blood struck him as downright i range, yet he guessed he could see the need for it. He was

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just glad the Grasshopper Level bishop hadn't thought up this idea back when he was sixteen or seventeen. It would have meant having to leave behind his family and the girl he planned to court and marry. He had been quite young then; he and Leah both were. Just how would he have felt if the brethren had decided to start switching men around back then? He might have had even fewer years with his former beloved.

When the waitress came with his sandwich platter, Jonas felt strangely relieved, glad to dive into his lunch and abandon futile memories.

Saturday, July 6 Dear Diary,

Today, while the girls took turns tending the roadside stand with Lydiann, I headed over to see Old Lady Henner. It's been a few weeks since my last visit, but 1 wanted to check in on her, see how she was feeling, especially since I think she might be dying. She's the oldest person living in the county at the present time, and she looks it, too. When I saw her pale face and frail condition, I asked if there was anything I could do maybe call on another Amish healer. I wish she might live on forever, though 1 know that's impossible. She's only human, after all.

Another reason I went to visit her was to make sure all my ailments, physical and mental, were tended to, in case she should die in her sleep here before too long. That might seem selfish, but I've come to depend on her and don't see how I'll manage when she goes. The dear thing has been such a cornfort.

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Dat and Aunt Lizzie have not been privy to my frequent visits over the years, and I don't plan on telling them. They would not approve, though there are many amongst the People who do put great stock in our Amish

hex doctors, Gid and the bishop included. Thankfully Dat has not been able to persuade iiiiv husband differently.

Mary Ruth and Robert stopped in at Dat's the other day, mid Mary Ruth looks as healthy as I've ever seen her. When I 'ijncd them from the rose garden, I called to the girls, and all i >/ mx ran down for a nice visit under the shade of the linden five, where we sipped cold lemonade. It was such fun seeing the way Robert and Mary Ruth smiled so fondly at each other, (is if they share a special secret . . . which, of course, tfie^ do. (loodness, Dat has made it clear he's just itching for a grandson, holding out hope for Mary Ruth to give him his first. As for me, I've given up on having more than three children, and all girls at that. Seems to me the Lord God has closed up my womb, and probably a good thing, too, after what I went through with Mimi though, of course, following her first visit to Old Lady Henner, there was never another sleepless night due to colic. 1 know Gid and the older girls were ever so happy about thq . Gid came right out and asked if I'd taken Miriam off to the hex doctor, and 1 told him the truth. He probably wondered why I'd waited so long.

Well, it's an awful hot July, but 1 can't complain. Living up here with tall shade trees sheltering the whole back of the house, we enjoy our evening hours on the porch, looking out over the flower gardens and laughing at the girls' cute antics, enjoying one another's company like nobody's business.

Respectfully, Hannah

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" I U X,

Lydiann hung on Jake's every word as they rode slowly together beneath the dark covering of sky and trees. He had a big talk on tonight, telling about the times his mother would read to his twin and himself, both of them squashed into a single large hickory rocker by a flickering fire in the wood stove.

"Mostly she read Bible stories to us, but sometimes she would read poetry about animals and nature by one of Dat's Amish friends," Jake said.

She found that interesting. "A man who's a poet, ya say?"

"Jah, and a real gut one, too."

"What sort of poems . . . rhyming ones?"

Jake laughed a little. "What kinds of poems don't rhyme?"

She tried to explain that there were, indeed, poems where the phrases and lines rambled along without any rhyme at all. She had come across them one day when she and some of her school friends had taken themselves off to Strasburg to the library there and stayed for hours reading all different kinds of books. Mamma Leah had never known of it, but Lydiann had happened into Lorraine Schwartz out on the street, and Lydiann remembered feeling as if she'd been caught doing something wrong, even though Mrs. Schwartz had merely eyed her curiously.

Lydiann shared with Jake that she sometimes felt she craved books, just as Mary Ruth told her she had at this age. Sometimes she felt as if she had a little piece of each of her older sisters in her, and, all in all, she was mighty glad the Lord God had made her the way she was. She could scarcely wait to get on with her life, particularly when Jake was ever so near, as he was right this minute. "I love ya, Lyddie," he whispered, reaching for her hand.

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She wondered how much longer it would be before he mljjht kiss her cheek, though she knew courting days were a nine to "get to know one another," as Mamma always said, iiiiid not about smooching.

So when Jake leaned near, their heads almost touching, .In- held her breath, fearing she might fail Mamma tonight, lor sure and for certain.

Just at that moment a hoot owl startled her with its nociinuul cry. "Ach, Jake!" she hollered.

"It's only a barn owl," he laughed.

Rut the sound from high in the tree had altered the intent of the moment, and in one way she was glad, thankful she had been careful to stay pure during their courtship. On the other hand, she almost wished his lips had found her face. Who was to ever know, after all? In fact, from what she heard from girlfriends and distant cousins, some parents expected their teenagers to do a bit of necking now and then. "It leads to marriage," said one, "which is just what the deacons, preachers, and the bishop hope for."

More marriages mean more babies, she knew the way the Lord God intended them to populate the community of the people. Thoughts of marriage and babies made plenty of good sense to Lydiann, especially tonight. Except that now the romantic moment had passed and Jake was back to talking about his twin sister.

Puh!

Leah decided to go on foot to visit Dr. Schwartz on Monday afternoon so that she could contemplate his answer all

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the long walk home. For now, she took her time, listening to the peeping of birds and insects in the dense woods, trying to calm her frayed nerves. She'd planned to arrive at the clinic a full hour before he resumed patient hours, well aware of Dr. Schwartz's daily schedule.

What will he say! she wondered. Will he brush me off again? She could only hope she was able to stand her ground this time . . . persevere until she was satisfied that what he revealed was the full story.

She was growing increasingly anxious to get the confrontation behind her. Doing such a thing went against her grain, yet the accumulation of unasked-for clues now made it impossible to avoid.

The road ahead wavered and blurred into watery colors as Leah finally allowed herself to let go angry tears. She felt strongly that if there was any truth at all to what she suspected, she had every right to lash out at Dr. Schwartz. Just how she might reveal her fury, she was undecided, because, fact was, the good doctor was probably not good at all, and she'd been schnookered, working for him and his wife all this time.

Sighing, she raised her head to the sky and tried her utmost to enjoy her morning walk the birdsong, the gentle rustle of trees, and the vastness of God's world. At this moment she felt as small as the tiniest insect. A feeling of helplessness nearly overtook her, and Leah stopped walking and turned around quickly, staring back at the long road from whence she'd come. Lord, are you with me in this?

Her tears ebbed a bit, and she realized then and there she had nothing to fear, nothing to be ashamed of. She would

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11ii 11 IRTsdf right around and walk forward ... for Sadie's sake. I In longer did it matter what Dr. Schwartz thought of her. Musi important was discovering if Sadie's child was alive or

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J~\s Leah made the turn left off Georgetown Road toward Dr. Schwartz's clinic, the wind gusted, and she found herself thinking of the Scripture in Philippians chapter four, which she had read just this morning: I can do all things through Christwhich strengtheneth me.

She began to whisper the Scripture, surrounded now by a marked sense of confidence. She felt undeniably convinced she was doing the right thing. I

am my father's daughter. ... I can do this, she assured herself, aware of her rising optimism. With God's help.

Dr. Schwartz was in his office, poring over a pile of papers, just as she assumed he might be, and when she knocked on the doorjamb of the open door, he looked up immediately. His eyebrows shot up. "Well, good morning, Leah. Aren't you here early?"

"I came to talk something over with you, Dr. Schwartz, if ya don't mind." Somehow she managed to get the whole sentence out without breathing.

The pause between her statement and the time involved

War her to inhale deeply was long enough for the doctor to ntirmiir, "Ah." The way he frowned and rapidly blinked his yes mude her feel somewhat hesitant, but she did not lose

It'll ri.

I Site began by asking right out the most urgent question of II. "What happened to Sadie's baby after you left with him lu* night he was born?"

I The doctor's frown deepened and he rose quickly to close

he door. When he turned to face her, he wore an odd look.

Bit' silt back down at his desk and gazed intently at the ceiling,

ptH'iningly aware of something she could not see. "Leah," he

mild, lowering his eyes to her, "you saw the baby. He was as

Muc us can be."

"Jah, ever so blue. But is it possible he turned pink some-

1 iiiit- between his birth and now?" She breathed again. "What I mean is ... could it be Sadie's son actually lived that nielli . that he lives even now?"

I Calmly, his hands folded on the desk before him, Dr.

Bchwartz replied, though nearly in a whisper at first. "I'm
mm id these may be the most startling words you've ever
fct'iird. Absolute^ no one else knows this about my own dear
pnindson your sister's son until now. . . ." He paused, look-
Blig down at his desk. Then, biting his lip, he began again.
(rSadie's premature baby did live that night. Quite a miracle,
even though I've heard of similar things happening. The
nltht air apparently revived him ... as phenomenal as any-
thing I've witnessed." He studied her attentively.

Leah breathed hard at the matter-of-fact way in which he
hud revealed the life-changing news. "You kept Sadie's baby,
then." . : ;; ... ;.. ,'.; -,:. /-:,;

"I weighed the consequences, Leah. My son's future . . .

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the fact that, at the time, Sadie had kept her pregnancy a secret from her
family. . . except for you and your aunt. My reasoning was sadly skewed,
you must know. I wanted what was best for my family, our good name . . .
the baby's future. I was terribly selfish."

"You should have returned him to Sadie to us. You never came back and told my grieving sister her baby was alive." Leah was nearly overwhelmed at the reality. "What happened to him? Where did you take my sister's son?"

"A good family gave him a home . . . once he was strong enough to leave this clinic."

"So you looked after him? You tended to Sadie's baby until he could be placed in the loving arms of... a new family?"

He nodded, eyes glistening. "I was torn between right and wrong . . . didn't consider the ultimate consequences. I didn't know the torment my poor decision would eventually produce in myself. In others. . ."

The doctor wept, not with sobs but with great sighs and tears coursing down his face. "I would go back to that night in a minute, if I could, and I would do everything differently. Believe me, Leah ... I would change everything."

She sat shaking in the chair across from his desk, trying hard to remain seated, fearing she might simply storm over to Dr. Schwartz and shout at him in Amish.

Holding on to the chair, she attempted to speak her mind without losing her temper. "How could you do such a thing? You stole my sister's baby from her." Suddenly she sprang to her feet. "If Sadie knew this, it would rip her heart in two!"

"My life was altered forever that night," he whispered, seemingly struggling to get the words out.

"Your life?" ' , : ; ; ; - - : ; ' "

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I I Ic remained silent for an awkward span of time. At last

I :.|iike again, "I have offered my continual remorse to

in I." He brushed sorrowful tears from his face, wiping his

He held hard with his folded white handkerchief. "I deserve no
ivy, Do as you must with what I have told you." He turned
away from her.

"You know what I'll do, she thought angrily. The People don't
own charges. It isn't our way.

"Inhaling, she demanded again, "Where'd you put Sadie's
lii Where is he?"

"Tannie and Peter Mast's youngest son is Sadie's boy. They
raising him as Mandie's twin brother."

"Jake Mast . . . the mirror image of Deny Schwartz. Her sus'
ions had been well founded.

"Sighing with a tremendous sense of sadness, Leah stood
ixi ro the beautiful desk, leaning her hands flat on its highly
Wished surface to support her weight, lest her trembling
lisc her to fall. "Does Fannie know who her young Jake
Illy is?"

"V. Schwartz picked up a pen and stared at it, then absent'
IndecjHy pressed it against a piece of paper. "Neither Peter
Ir Fannie has any reason to suspect Jake is not their flesh
1.1 Mood. You see, Fannie did birth twins the first was born

111 before midnight, after I returned from delivering Sadie's
tpy the same night. And up until the moment when Fannie's
llborn second baby came, I had no idea what I would do
lh Sadie and Derry's frail little one. He was barely alive."

1 hesitated for a moment, apparently pained at the memory.
pu must believe me, Leah. I felt then as if God almighty
Inl made it possible inexplicably so for Fannie to nurture
fill mother Jake, for my grandson to be raised in an Amish

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family, his rightful heritage. And at the same time I knew sending him
home with the Masts would protect my family from shame."

He went on to say that switching Fannie's dead baby son with Sadie's own
premature one had seemed sensible, if not the right thing to do at the time,
and the Masts had never been the wiser. "In doing this, I've been fortunate
enough to watch my grandson grow up ... a luxury I've denied your sister."

"You took it upon yourself to do that which is only for the Lord God to do!"
Leah's rage was fanned by his explanation, and she was helpless to quench
it.

The doctor stared blankly at his desk, tear stains evident on his face.

She had to stop to collect herself so many thoughts assailed her. . . nearly
too many to consider. "If I'm understandin' what ya just said, Fannie Mast
has given Jake all the love my sister gladly would've offered him. . . ."

Dr. Schwartz forlornly nodded.

She clenched her fists and turned to stare at the wall. "So you must've buried Fannie's dead baby in the grave on your property, then." She swung around to face him again. "Is that what ya did?"

Again he nodded. "The least I could do for the Masts' fullterm baby was give him a proper burial."

"And I'll bet you thought it would soothe your conscience."

He rubbed his face and kept his hands over his eyes for the longest time before looking at her again. "I could be arrested . . . sent to jail for this crime, if word gets out."

"Jah, for certain." .

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"Do us you see fit," he said flatly, as though resigned to his |i" ' I at c.

| The iVople are forgiving and generous ... nearly to a ji ...li." Slu- struggled to continue. "Even if Peter and Fannie) .me to know this horrible thing, they would not condemn |i . I'm quite sure of it." Part of her wanted to see him H|iilrm, Inir it was evident that the guilt-ridden years had liiHuly laken their toll, transforming him into the dejected Hiiiu Ik* now was.

Wllh ;i great sigh, she said, "It might be best if I not conid mm- work in' for you and Lorraine." Then, before he could Mrr, she excused herself from her expected hours of labor ^Hdiiy. Leah hurried out of his office, not looking back at ^HeIlihc established by the man the community had wrongly ^Ht'il ... a man who had deceived them all. Sixteen pre^Hh ye;iiis had been lost to Sadie to all of them forever. ^Hnoi with anger, Leah headed down the road, plagued by MFVriTilile truth that Mamma's cousins had unknowingly l(4i i J Sadie's child Dat's only grandson. I I, icfi/> Mast.

I I low bitterly ironic it was that Peter and Fannie's youngpi inn belonged to the cousins they'd chosen to shun.

I As if the news of Jake Mast's being Sadie's only living Hi tit I wasn't enough, Leah began to feel under the weather.

1h was painfully aware that she must hold close the disheartIliiiiit] Information, lest she weaken and pour out her shock, miliit'HM, and exasperation to either Dat or Aunt Lizzie. It's

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Sadie who deserves to hear it first. When I can muster the strength. . . .

Sleep refused to come that night, and Leah stared at the dark windows, wishing the moon were out in full to spread its white light into the room the same bedroom where she had oftentimes wondered where Sadie had taken herself off to back when her sister was in the midst of rumschprunge. As it was, Leah felt the murky room was dreadfully silent with Sadie sleeping next door in the Dawdi Haus.

Sadie surely slept soundly still, having dreams of the little ones she'd lost. . . longing in the very depths of her soul for the babies she'd birthed but never held long enough to truly love or know.

A breeze blew in the open windows, gentle yet strong enough for the shades to flap slightly. When should I tell her! Leah wondered, knowing it would be heartless to keep the information from her any longer. Yet she struggled with the idea of coming right out and saying Jake was Sadie's son, especially since the Masts had kept all of them at arm's length and worse. Considering the commotion this could cause between the two estranged families, she shied from revealing such news to anyone. Still, the thought of being privy to what Sadie did not know caused Leah a wakeful and troublesome night.

By the noon meal of the next day, Leah was in such turmoil she could scarcely keep her attention on serving the large pot roast to the family, let alone interact normally wirl \ either Lydiann or Abe as they sat chattering at the table, eager to enjoy the dinner she and Sadie had prepared

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||i i(jri I id. All Leah could think of was how she had been kept If)i>m \\w truth about her own birth mother until adulthood, hIh'H'I'v Living missed out on the extra-special closeness she Uil^lil li;iv(.' experienced with Lizzie had she known differently Hkii link- girl. Though her Mamma had always loved her, they ttnd in 'I shared the strong bond Sadie and Mamma had always Hlml, NtTiningly so closely linked, and understandably so, Sadie nHiiK Mamma's firstborn and all. Indeed, had Leah known bin ml Lizzie, she might have had that with her. I AI last Leah concluded she could not, would not, keep)M I', ilie near-sacred news about Jake from Sadie, who had prt'ii dreadfully wounded so many times over. It was time for Rrr JtlNter to hear the facts of the matter as both Dr. Schwartz tid she knew it.

I I c;ih contemplated the afternoon ahead, thinking she hiIhIh invite Sadie to take a walk someplace where they could me |H-ik'ctly alone, once their gardening work was complete. jPt'ihups the woods? But no. How much better it would be to pttVf 11 ie sun shining on them as they walked and talked. P(/llli i lie strong emotions that were sure to surface, she defiliii'ly waited to be where they could see the openness of sky In hi lu-ls.

1 As she placed the heavy platter of roast and vegetables |ii-Knr her family, Leah settled in her mind on the best place Iim I icimost solemn talk with dearest Sadie.

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JTienry had heaved himself out of bed the day after the grueling confrontation with Leah, floundering to find his robe and house slippers long before Lorraine might awaken. He had then proceeded to the bath, where he'd replayed the conversation as he lathered up his whiskers for

shaving, fearing he had done the wrong thing in sharing Jake Mast's identity.

He recalled splashing on some aftershave and dressing before wandering downstairs to the sitting room between the front room and the kitchen. There he'd sat in the stillness for more than a half hour, pondering the probable destruction of his life until the newspaper had thumped against the back door. He had risen slowly to collect it, hungry for news of the outside world to choke out his own agitated thoughts.

All morning long he had gone back and forth about the wisdom of having revealed the truth. Now that he was sitting at his office desk, a sliced apple and a turkey and Swiss-cheese sandwich uneaten before him, he pondered again what he had done. Such stupidity!

Yet he had to hope his devastating confession was safe

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Haji LprH. Sighing, he could only imagine what she was going to do now. His doing ... all of it. Torn between the truth he felt sure to inflict on her older sister, Leah, aggravated by the tremendous burden of her betrayal, he had done her a great disservice, and he was not only of having revealed the deed, but of having revealed it in the first place.

He tried to picture Jake growing up in Abram's household, loved and loved by his real mother, surrounded by his family.

He couldn't contact the authorities, will she? He did not, Henry wondered if word might even get to Peter's and Fannie's ears. What then? He would have to be straightforward with the Masts, if it came to that. And what of poor Jake? The innocent young man! In- forced to come face-to-face with not only his birth mother but the entire Ebersol family. Would they ever accept Jake as their own? Would Jake himself?

His questions wrenched him every which way, and he felt as if he had reached for his sandwich as he had upon slipping into bed last night. Although he had experienced no lulling asleep, he had awakened repeatedly throughout the night, even startling himself with the sound of his own miserable moaning. And Lorraine, saint that she was, had slipped through the many thrashings and turnings he felt nimble to control.

My life is in ruins, Henry thought, realizing that if his wife

had indeed viewed this offense, he would have to daily atone for every

sin he had ever committed . . . and there were many.

He knew that she would purposely hold it over him that wasn't

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her way. His reluctance for her to know about their grandson now had more to do with Lorraine's keen interest in God, which made him feel even more culpable.

Leah suggested she and Sadie take a walk following noon dinner, to which Sadie heartily agreed. She simply went along, enjoying the wispy clouds softening the rays of the sun, bringing the slightest bit of relief from the hottest part of the afternoon.

"Did ya know that Dat doesn't believe the English know anything 'bout how to gentle a horse?" Sadie had been thinking on this, having heard Dat say to Gid earlier that morning that he thought their approach was an insult to the horse. But the lack of a response from Leah made Sadie doubt she was any too interested in talking about horses. No, it was fairly obvious, now as they'd made the turn onto the main road and were heading southeast toward the Peachey's place, that there was something very important on Leah's mind.

Leah slowed the pace and turned to face her. "Sadie, I don't honestly know how to tell ya . . . what I must say to you, but I'm gonna try."

She could see Leah was struggling as they continued walking, coming up on the area where the road opened up and the field on the left stretched out to a pretty pond a small one, to be sure, but one that made for a lovely verdant setting, nonetheless. "What's on your mind, sister?" she asked, feeling breathless and almost perplexed at the tone of Leah's voice.

"Oh, Sadie, this is the hardest thing I've ever had to do ... but I want you to know that if I could keep this back

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lii onler to spare you if I thought it wouldn't hurt you worse in never know well, I wouldn't utter a single word." Leah \v;is absolutely shaking with emotion.

"You're frightening me," Sadie said. "What on earth is it?"

They walked for too long in total silence, but Sadie ilcfiilcd not to pressure Leah. It seemed best for her sister to I like her time with whatever was troubling her, even though Sadie couldn't begin to think what that might be.

Along the road, a green fringe of pasture flourished where I hiu feelers on sheaths of grass turned purple, then sapphire, I hc-n a deep gray-lavender as the sun shifted in and out of the laini cover of cirrus clouds.

Leah spoke again, a near whisper. "Sadie, your baby. . . I lie son you birthed in Aunt Lizzie's cabin ... he didn't die I hat night."

Sadie stopped walking and felt as if her heart might stop heating. "What are you sayin'?" Her voice cracked.

Leah reached to hold both her hands. "Come with me. I'll ti-ll you all that I've just learned."

They turned a sharp left, and she followed Leah down ih rough a vacant and large piece of land, her mind and heart m'reaming to know more even as her sister quietly shared the astounding story.

At last they stood at the grave where Dr. Schwartz had buried the Masts' real son. Sadie was scarcely able to see for her tears. Leah held her as she sobbed with both sorrow and

j< >y.

My son's alive! she thought, and when she turned to look at her sister, she saw on her face a reflection of her own emotions. Sadie hardly knew what to think or say. She felt almost

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ill, and a cold shiver ran up her spine. "Dr. Schwartz has known all along?"

"Jah, I'm sorry to say."

"Well, I must tell Jake ... I must meet with him privately. Right away."

"Oh, Sadie, think on this a bit. Think what this knowledge might do to him, to Mandie ... to the entire Mast family."

Sadie shook her head. Obviously Leah didn't understand and had no idea what she was asking. Jake was a fine young man with a gentle nature she knew this sure as anything, having watched him with Abe, shaken his hand at market, and witnessed the lighthearted expression in his eyes. "I can't wait any longer, don't you see? I've already lost all this time!"

Leah's head drooped, and when she looked up at Sadie, she was crying. "Please think about your son, Sadie. Peter and Fannie are the only parents he's known. For you to go to him now and reveal this... I just think, well, I s'pose I wouldn't have ever told ya if I thought you'd press ahead without thinkin' things through . . . ya know?" Leah reached over and touched Sadie's elbow.

Sighing, Sadie whispered, "Jah," choking back her own tears. "Maybe I'm bein' awful hasty, but I want to get to know him. . . . The years have flown from me."

Why is all this happening? Why now?

The entire story was as strange as can be, yet she would not doubt it for a minute, for Leah could be trusted. And looking into her sister's eyes, seeing her concern, as well as her sadness, Sadie knew something else: She must do Leah's bidding and simply wait. But when would be the right time? She had no idea, and all she could think about now was that

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In liiul ;ilready looked into the face and felt the hand of In i only living child. Her son.

I c;ili was speaking again. "I think it wise to keep this just i wecu us till we carefully consider what we ought to do next, ll miylhing. Till we seek some wisdom from above."

"|nh, from the Lord God."

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I c:ili nodded her head, eyes still glistening. "We mustn't MinIi inio something you'd surely regret later."

"And you don't think we should ask Dat or Aunt Lizzie In ml i his?"

"Not just yet, no."

Sadie, though terribly frustrated, began to slowly undernl.uuJ the reasoning behind Leah's words. At least in this soltiii moment she did. Later today she did not know how impulsive she might feel, how eager she might be to hitch up (lit- horse to the buggy and drive over to the Masts' orchard

I ii ii isc to tell Jake the good news that his real mother had i (uiio to take him home, where he belonged.

Ach! I mustn't do any such thing! She imagined the potenii.il scene she would make with Jake's family, his close twin, till 11is older siblings and him. Sadly she began to think that

II .he iruly loved her flesh and blood, she might need to leave ! I nin in ignorance, never knowing he was the illegitimate child nil one of the Ebersol cousins his family had shunned.

As they rose and walked back toward the main road, Sadie hiiinight of the night she had told Leah of her youthful pregin.iiK y and how the roles on this day were, in a peculiar way, li|inic reversed. Today it had been for Leah to share the truth hli.ii Sadie's own son was very much alive, instead of Sadie lli'vi.'iiling her secret about the wee babe growing inside her. I'lluly, this child of hers had been veiled in secrecy from the llliiR' of his earliest beginnings.

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The days slid together, hot and muggy, the mid-July heat rising like a deep green tide in the open pasture. The intolerable temperatures brought with them sultry, restless nights for all the residents of the Ebersol Cottage, particularly Leah and Sadie, who had agreed that, for now, it was best Jake not be told of his true family roots. At only sixteen, he was too young for such jolting news, they reasoned, and the strained relations between their two families only compounded the problem.

Leah was prayerful, even watchful over her sister, hoping Sadie might somehow manage the emotional trauma she was now experiencing with some seamstress, keeping her feelings in check, at least while in the presence of other family members. And even though Sadie and Leah had endured several rather tense days, going so far as to exchange angry words in the vegetable garden one afternoon, Leah was quite sure no one suspected them of having had a fuss over something as earthshaking as Jake Mast's being Sadie's son. Such a secret to keep!

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With tomorrow a "no-church" Sunday, this Saturday night was an evening when most courting couples were out in the moonlight together. The traditional arrangement ensured their privacy. But all hours didn't cause stress in the family if the father or son of a household decided to sleep in a bit on the morning.

Having hunger pangs in the middle of the night, Leah went downstairs for a glass of milk and a cookie when she listened upon voices in the kitchen. Never having expected to find Lydiaann entertaining her beau here in the house that warm and moonlit night, of all things, Leah halted in surprise. She could see both Lyddie and a tall young man in the shadows, over in the corner where Dad's hickory rocker had usually sat in the summer, out of the way of the wood stove, which was used for cooking even during the heat of July and August. She could see the two standing quite close together, talking. Not so eager to listen in, she decided to go and sit on

1110 steps leading to the second floor, hoping Lyddie might have the common sense to send the young man on his way fairly soon. Yet even there, she could hear their voices.

"We'll get hitched as soon as the harvest is past," the young man said, startling her. "We'll be the first couple pub-

lished at Preachin' this year."

Lydiann laughed softly.

"I'd marry ya tomorrow if we could."

"But we're underage," Lydiann said. "Will your father sign for you to marry?"

There was a long pause; then Lyddie's beau replied, "Somehow or other, I'll get him to say he will."

Leah felt terrible sitting there eavesdropping, yet she realized her girl was in over her head with this boy. Just what

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on earth could she do? Speak to Dat, maybe? But no, thinking back on her courting days with Jonas, she would not have wanted such interference, although there had certainly been enough of that coming from her father, for certain.

She rose and thought of heading back upstairs to simply wait for Lyddie to say good-bye to her fellow and head for bed. Just as she moved to do so, she heard Lydiann talking again. "Oh, I love ya so." And suddenly Lyddie burst out crying, as if her heart might break, saying she didn't see how her father would agree to let her marry so awful young. "You just don't know what you're askin', Jake . . . you don't know Dat."

Jake.

Leah froze in place, unable to make her legs move forward. She knew she'd heard correctly, and her heart was pounding much too hard. Could it be Lydiann was seeing Jake Mast?

"Ach . . . Lyddie, don'tcha worry your perty head," Jake was saying. "Things'll work out; you'll see. We're meant to bo together."

Calm down, Leah told herself. There are oodles of Jakes round these parts. Nothing to fret about.

Even so, she knew she would not be hurrying back upstairs yet. No, she'd wait right here all night long to find out which tall Jake her Lyddie was crying over like there was no tomor-

row.

Sadie stared in the little hand mirror on the dresser thai quiet Sunday, trembling as she dressed. She looked much as she had a week ago, although she had lost some inches, since the waist of her apron was quite loose. Staring at her features,

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ill*1 ilolU e<l her eyes had an almost distant look to them. Will

I i /ontic Jake Mast the way a mother knows her son? Will 1 j t /* rdlitnicd to fove him . . . share my life with him?

(lie I in icd she might never lay eyes on him again, let |il i a* H|u';ik privately with him. The droop of her mouth gave ii .',' hci Irars as she studied herself in the small mirror. M MHflH liinl always said to look at the eyes of a person to My wli;it they were really thinking, but now as she pon^Hj fhai, Sadie felt sure it was especially the mouth that P^^ytnl I he truth about a person's happiness or grief. She let) i.iLf Mi);, without forcing even the slightest smile, and she j iiiipiiM'd at how terribly alone she seemed to appear yum* hi u I weary of life.

| I lidiv mi choice now but to keep this quiet, she thought. I WMjLn'tih 11rv word.

^Hjir uvnl downstairs, through the small front room of the HRli I I; it is to the connecting door to the main house. In the j i i uplioiird of the big kitchen, she pulled from its shelf a [' \ illume, Martyrs Mirror or The Bloody Theatre. An L.-.uiii i>| seventeen centuries of Christian martyrdom, Mi Ithliiii', one of her father's own great-grandmothers, Catharhii Mi-ylin, Hat frequently read silently from the book. Leah {ill ! ' 11 i lie one to tell Sadie about their special relationship U ll iii;i|<eous woman following Sadie's return home. Not

II Liny .ilieii that, Sadie had read for herself the heartrending It!* of tlir i'feat-grandmother who'd given up her life for the I*-I I JtmiN

I liltlly I he Hnal recorded words of this godly woman, Btilhir In many children, comforted Sadie's heart as she held Bf I'in hook ever so close, almost cradling it. . . .

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All that long morning Sadie kept wishing Dawdi John were still alive; she could sit with him and talk about most anything even, she was sure, about her long-lost son. But Dawdi could no longer lend his kind, listening ear . . . gone to heaven, where Sadie had thought all her little ones were, up until a few days ago. It seemed so strange, nearly like a dream, to think her only son lived and with Mamma's cousins. She had to remind herself repeatedly of the reality of it.

Since the house seemed deathly still, she decided to visit Hannah and the girls. She hurried out the back door of the Dawdi Haus, wishing she didn't have to reside alone in an addition typically meant for older relatives. Still, she knew she ought to be grateful for a place to live so near to those she loved.

Hurrying across the wide backyard, she walked toward the mule road, waving to Dat, who was stumbling out of the barn, rubbing his eyes like he'd just awakened from a catnap in the haymow. It was so hot she almost

wished she'd stayed indoors fanning herself with the colorful paper fans
Lydiann had made a while back at school.

Thinking of her own school days past, she was all the more anxious to see
Hannah's girls so cute they were when they stood together all in a row.
Young Miriam, already six years old, had become a surprisingly cheerful
sort nothing at all the way she had started out. Though she'd never come
right out and asked Hannah, Sadie guessed her sister had taken her youngest
to one of the hex doctors for that, since she'd seen such a drastic change in
not only the baby but in Hannah herself. : v ,

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I Ma Mi\i' and Katie Ann must have seen her coming from
fell' hack porch, because they ran down the steps and hugged
If hiird. "Mamma, Mamma! Aunt Sadie's here for a visit,"
ty culled.

I Pi'elly soon, Hannah and Mimi joined them. "Well, it's
H yti came up today, or we'd start thinkin' you a stranger."
I "Never that." She followed the girls to the porch, where
by nil saf down, full of smiles. "It's sure cooler up here."
I "Jnh, under all these trees," Hannah replied. "Gid says it's
llyhl nice place for a house."

I "Where's Gid today?" Sadie asked.

8 "(Ver yonder, visiting an uncle."

I Ida Mae asked if Sadie wanted some lemonade or some-

||111 else cold to drink. "We have sun tea, too . . . sweetened

jlli honey."

I "' I o:i sounds gut," she said, glad to get her mind off her-

jf . . , and Jake.

I Hut when Ida Mae returned with a tall glass of tea for her, |c was struck by how very dear each of Hannah's daughters IN, To think what life might have been like without even one of itii.... Sadie felt as if she might cry, contemplating each

I1 Ik- wee lives lost to her. Even the one that had just been lind was still so far out of her reach.

I hollowing breakfast Monday morning, Leah went out pile and began hoeing weeds in the vegetable and flower Ifdens, not caring that by now Dr. Schwartz would be Igging his former housekeeper. Truth was, she wanted to IVe nothing to do with the man, and the best way to avoid

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him was simply to stay as far away from the clinic as possible. Let him explain to Lorraine why I'm not coming back, she thought, still beside herself with anger.

Meanwhile, Sadie was inside, moping about, although no one was in the house to inquire of her sister's dark mood at least not at the present time.

Leah took out her intense frustration, even fear, on the vinelike weeds that had determined to choke out the staked tomato plants. All the while she mulled over what on earth would happen if Jake Mast who was indeed Lydiann's beau somehow obtained his father's permission to marry young . . . assuming his father wasn't privy to his son's courtship of one of Abram Ebersol's daughters, that is. Her imagination ran away with her regarding Lydiann and Jake's courting relationship, revealed by Leah's Saturday-night

kitchen vigil. Sadly she thought of the strong possibility of deformed and mentally retarded babies such an aunt-nephew union might produce. And dear Lydiann what would she think if she discovered she was in love with her sister's son? The emotional implications alone were enough to cause serious problems for Lydiann and Jake.

She wished the dilemma might simply disappear, but there was no escaping what she now knew must be swiftly dealt with. Even so, she must carefully contemplate this and ask God for help in knowing what she should or shouldn't do.

And there was the matter of Sadie, too. If Leah were to tell her of Lydiann and Jake, would she become distraught at this devastating news? Leah recalled all too well the hopelessness and the long, sad nights that had beset Sadie following the loss of her son all those years ago. Sadie had sniffled into the wee hours each night, competing with baby Lydiann's own

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m of crying. Most likely Sadie was already reliving all of that,

PU1 Wiiiuiuls having been reopened by Leah herself. And now

hi* Inlesl discovery. . .

I Lcnh didn't know what to do. She longed to run to the

UUiNt* nnd check on her sister, embrace her, but maybe it was

UiNl nIk' chop away these nasty weeds, though it would likely

M Siulic some good if she were the one out here hacking away

u lite pesky vines. Goodness, how she must need something to

mund on right about now!

I Aunt Lizzie wandered over from the barn, looking pink in

fcpluce. "It's too hot for weeding, Leah," she said, wiping her
uw, "But if I know you, you'll keep on workin' no matter
lh.ii 1 say."

I Leah had to laugh at that. "I think ya know me too well,"

Kw replied, leaning on the hoe. "I don't quit till the job's

I Lizzie turned and glanced toward the house. "Where's
Indie?"

I "Inside."

I "Tryin" to keep cool?"

I Leah said nothing, hoping Lizzie wouldn't take it upon
icrsLilf to fetch Sadie just now.

I "Is something the matter with your sister?" Lizzie frowned
llul shielded her eyes with one hand. "For the past couple of
liiys she's been down in the mouth."

I "Seems so" was all Leah would say. All she could say.

I

I "I'm thinkin' it's time we made us some ice cream. Choc-

|i|alc, maybe. Might put a smile on all our faces, ain't so?" f Leah nodded
and watched Lizzie head toward the house, |n>ping Sadie might be
sheltered away in her bedroom, except with its being so hot, she hardly
thought her sister would want

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to be upstairs in the Dawdi Haus. '

Returning to her weeding, she forced her thoughts to the upcoming farewell for the teenage boys headed out to Ohio. She wondered how the mothers, sisters, and even sweethearts would ever manage saying good-bye. Gid had mentioned to her and Dat last week that it would be nice for some of the women to bake cakes and serve them on the first Sunday in August, following the final Lancaster Preaching service for more than two handfuls of boys. Since the church meeting and the subsequent singing would be held at Old Jonathan Lapp's house, Leah had already talked with his unmarried daughter about providing several hot-water sponge cakes for the common meal.

Just then the thought popped into her head that she ought to talk to Gid about somehow getting Jake Masi included in the group of young men headed to Ohio. A solution, maybe? she wondered, realizing it would mean having to share the truth about Jake with her brother-in-law. I'll have to talk to Sadie, too ... tell her about Lydiann being in love with Jake wanting to marry a close blood relative!

But the thought of the awful heartbreak such a plan would cause Lydiann, as well as Sadie, kept her from marching right up to Gid and Hannah's place. How on earth could she be responsible for setting such a thing in motion? With a shudder, she realized that what she was thinking of doing was nearly equal to what Dat had done about Jonas Mast, arranging to have him work in Ohio as a cabinetmaker's apprentice.

Feeling distressed, Leah left the garden and headed back to the house for some ice-cold lemonade.

275 p/ense storm clouds, which before Tuesday's noon had inclement rain, had all but dissipated when Leah met Sadie % I he small porch off the Dawdi Haus, where Sadie was beat% I'll like.

"Sister, I'm afraid I have something mighty difficult to tell Ml," Leah began softly, hating to find herself the bearer of in news as she explained how she'd stumbled onto the lately! it conversation in the kitchen between Lydiann and Jake.

Sudie's efes widened as she promptly abandoned her (i iic, draping the rugs over the porch railing. "Ach, are ya yn so sure?" Shaking her head in apparent disbelief, Sadie's it r I urned ashen, as if she might be ill. "This can't be."

"Bui it is, and we must do something to put a stop to it Pit I light quick."

"Why must this be happenin'?" Sadie moaned. "On top of Veiything else!"

I,t'iih leaned on the banister. "If we don't do anything, \ \$y prob'ly will end up married. We can't stand by and ll't'ly hope they change their minds 'bout each other."

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"We have to think more on this," Sadie said. "Let's walk up to the high meadow go somewhere more private."

Agreeing, Leah hurried off with Sadie, the two of them talking through the ins and outs of this almost unthinkable quandary.

When they'd exhausted all possibilities, including telling Lydiann privately of Jake Mast's parentage something both feared would come to no good end Sadie tearfully begged Leah not to mention a word to anyone. "Not even to Gid," she said. "I'm just not ready to think 'bout having Jake sent away."

"Well, honestly, it's the wisest choice we've discussed," Leah said.

"Jah, I see that." Still, Sadie said she couldn't bring herself to agree to anything, least of all something that would take her only living child farther

away from her. ,

All that day and the next, Leah went about her chores and responsibilities, hoping a better solution would present itself. She wasn't too surprised when Lorraine Schwariz stopped by the vegetable stand, asking for her, and Lydiann sent the doctor's wife up to the house, around to the back door.

Lorraine's eyes were full of concern. "We miss you terribly, Leah. We can't be without your wonderful help."

So as not to open up the troublesome topic with the doctor's unsuspecting wife, Leah promised to return to work the following day, saying she had not been feeling well lately which was entirely true. Surely Dr. Schwartz, wretched man

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He who would understand the source of Leah's illness hit! KI liiiiiiic relay this exchange to him. As justified as her Inn had been, Leah felt sorry about having stayed put at f , living innocent Lorraine in the lurch.

When Lorraine had gone her way, Leah turned her attention to Sadie. She understood why her sister wanted to keep

It is about' Jake, wanting nothing to hamper her chances of ii'-nlj] Into him a selfish but unsurprising reaction, for

It is Smile's present grief, along with her hope for at least one Kji iJiK'ounter with her son, caused Leah to consent for now | i i'p mum about Jake and Lydiann's romance. Yet each day

It is a punned brought opportunity for Sadie's sister to fall more Mtply In love with Sadie's son.

A full week had passed since Leah had heard Jake's declaration of love for Lydiann, and she felt increasingly anxious. I vhh 11ware that this Sunday there was to be another singi. h riins the cornfield at the Peacheys' place, where Dorcas li! her husband, Tomato Joe Zook, lived with their young

faulty now that Smitty and Miriam had moved to the Dawdi I(M m, There was no question in Leah's mind that Lydiann nil i It I tfo, particularly with the singing this close to home. wiMle wouldn't even need to bother asking Abe for a ride ll>' ii she could simply walk over there. I I onh wished she could approach Lydiann with her conI 111. about Jake, but neither she nor Sadie felt that was wise. It1 ili In particular had a strong desire to shield Lyddie from Iti 11 ul h about her forbidden courtship with Jake, and unit1 ' i vlng as Dr. Schwartz might be, she felt concern for him

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and especially his good-hearted wife, as well. Truth be told, Lyddie wasn't so good at keeping secrets, and in the wink of an eye, everyone might know that the doctor, whom so many had trusted, was responsible for this horrible deed. Worse still, Jake's relationship to the only family he had ever known could be placed in jeopardy as Sadie's past reputation was once again brought to light. Ach, but such a revelation would be a devastating blow to Dat and Aunt Lizzie, too! Leah dreaded the thought of telling anyone at all, though Gid might actually be able to quietly help do something about the mindboggling Druwwel. And what an entangled problem it was!

She had prayed all week long there might be a better answer. If she could just convince Sadie how essential it was for Jake to leave ... to help her understand that what Leah assumed her sister wanted most desperately a private encounter with Jake most likely wouldn't happen anytime soon, and in a few months the wedding season would be upon them. No, they couldn't simply mark time when something this important was at stake. Leah must act immediately.

The hayloft had often drawn Sadie as a small girl when she was sad or miffed. She much preferred the sweetness ol the hay to the lower level of the bank barn, where the enduring reek of the animals saturated the air. But this night, she'd felt terribly alone in the Dawdi Haus; the heat had been sti fling as she tossed about in her bed in the room where Auni Lizzie had slept

before she'd married Dat. Sadie had gotten up and stood near the open window, yearning for even tinslightest waft of a breeze, and then headed downstairs to tin'

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II " Inn, where she'd opened the screen door. There she had

11 i. i 11111 (If (i r I he longest time on the little square porch, lookIt mil
inw.uxl the top of the Peacheys' farmhouse and their

= 11 w.in close to two o'clock in the morning when she made

11 wny mil" to their own barn and gingerly climbed the ladder

1' 'he Imyinow just under the eaves. Tired as she was, she

I iltlii'i think of allowing herself to sleep there, with the [fillet1 mul the insects crawling about. Despite the presence of Hhr hum r;its, she was ever so sure the pests were there, just bull til view. Late as it was, Lydiann was probably still out rid|ftw* inkier ("he stars with Jake Mast, and Sadie was determined

I1 > -iff lor herself exactly how it was between the pair.

I Sighing, she thought back to the day she'd first heard her Illniil with Derry was actually alive. How could things have ICliiinged so radically for her in one respect, yet nothing else ln.nl seemingly changed at all? She sat in the hay, having ||hi urinary conversations with Jake in her head, trying to guess Ivli.ii another face-to-face meeting with him might be like li'-'W thai she keew he was her flesh and blood. Would he

I1 .|.i<riare knowing that she, not Fannie Mast, was his real |i"< iIht? Would he be upset? Would he even believe her?

I 11 irmented, she rose and began to pace the upper level,

|i ij; hack and forth in her mind. And what of Jake's love for

(I vH.iin? Wasn't it probable he was simply experiencing jiniirihing akin to puppy love? If Leah would simply bide her Biiiu- and not speak to Gid, as she'd promised, there was mlwiiys the possibility Jake might become disinterested in |Lyili:idu and move on to a new girlfriend, as many young men till ihrir middle teens were known to do. Sadie could only

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hope so, because the thought of Jake's being sent away was almost more than she could bear.

The tickle of kitten fuzz against her bare foot awakened Sadie with a start, and she realized hazily that, despite her intentions, she must have settled down on the threshing floor, amongst the various mother cats and their kittens. But now she was quite awake and aware of the sound of a horse and buggy. . . and voices wafting through the darkness.

"Oh, Jake, I'm nervous 'bout askin' Dat for his permis-
sion.

"We mustn't fret, Lyddie. Mamma always said the Lord God moves heaven and earth for those in love." It was Jake's voice, but if Sadie hadn't known better she might've thought Derry was speaking.

Let Jake have pure motives, Lord. . . .

Sadie was ever so anxious to lay eyes on him again, even in the dim light of a half moon the faintest silhouette would satisfy her heart so she moved to the window and peered into the night.

Lydiann's voice was muffled now as she pressed her face against Jake's shoulder. Sadie watched them embrace near the buggy and then gaze into each other's eyes.

The scene told Sadie just how serious they were. This was most likely not the puppy love she'd hoped to witness.

With tears in her eyes, she could only wonder what it would mean to her sister and Jake and their future children if no one stopped them. Spared them, truly.

Sadie knew beyond all doubt she must tell Leah it was for the best -Prodigal

Appleseed could confide in Gid and see that Jake was somehow involved among the boys traded.

Tomorrow Lydiann, thought Sadie, moving from the window. Will she ever survive such a loss? How will I?

It happened upon Gid as he was rounding up the cows

in the afternoon milking. She felt awkward, his being alone and

lone. In fact she knew it was necessary, what with Sadie not feeling

him coming along.

"Nice day, ain't?" She folded her hands in front of her.

He nodded. "We could use some rain, but, jah ... a right

rain, day."

She stood still just then, realizing she had little time to

say it. "I... uh, Gid, there's something awful important

in my mind."

He turned his full attention to her.

"As you know, Sadie gave birth to a baby years ago, and

kin- thought the wee one was born dead," Leah began, aware

Ji' had heard a\$ much at Sadie's kneeling repentance at
jprenching, nearly seven years ago. "Well, it's come to light
pinl her son is actually quite alive."

I "I Ie's alive1." Gid was frowning as he held her gaze. "Oh,
jleihi, no wonder ya came to talk to me. Where's Sadie's boy
low.'11

"Growin' up as Peter Mast's youngest son." She spoke fluiiv softly now,
explaining all that she knew as quickly as llu' could. "And worst of all,
Jake's seein' our Lydiann . . . and [quite seriously." I looking even more
puzzled, Gid squared his shoulders.

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"How on God's green earth do ya know he's courtin' Lydiann?"

Somewhat embarrassed, she shared what both she and Sadie had overheard.
She sighed, pressing on, hoping shr might appeal to Gid's kindness.
"Honestly, what I have in mind will bring Lyddie much sadness, and she
won't under stand what's happened to her beau . . . but I've been wondering
if Jake shouldn't be one of the boys approached aboui going out to Ohio. Ya
know ... to get him away from Lydiann, his aunt by blood."

Gid nodded his head emphatically. "I sure can see when1 you're comin'
from. I can talk to the bishop about it riglil quick."

To this Leah shook her head. "Let's keep this 'tween you, me, and Sadie for
now."

Willingly, Gid agreed. Leah was ever so sure he understood the impact such
a revelation could have on the cornmunity of the People. No good thing
could ever come of it.

Hitching up his horse and carriage, Gid went straightaway to Grasshopper Level to speak with Peter Mast, mighty concerned. He found Peter in his apple orchard, puffing on his pipe and muttering to himself as he ambled along.

Catching Peter's eye, Gid introduced himself, though being a preacher for the district neighboring Grasshopper Level, he was fairly certain Peter knew who he was at least by name.

"Jah, I know ya well enough." Peter's eyes narrowed. " 'Tis

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^niily)mii I hing you got yourself loose from that Leah EberH ! ,l,uvsay."

BBJt>l wondered where Peter was going with such a snide

HhiI>, Inn hearing in mind his business there, he held his

Wmf "I otik, I best be gettin' to the point of why I'm here,"

uljil, anxious to put some distance between himself and

iiilillu-aided man. " 'Tis a right touchy subject I'm here

1-'ml, Imii seems your son Jake is awful serious about Abram's

tyllmin."

I'tMci coughed and removed the pipe from between his HAprt! lips. "Now, just a minute here. Did ya say one of Min Hbersol's daughters?"

^'Jiili, ihat's what I'm sayin'. Seems Jake's determined to ^*y Iut, and as a preacher and Lydiann's brother-in-law, it Hflhlrs me that she is thinkin' of marriage at such a young HI' ,s;iil Gid, withholding the sensitive information that HI whs : 11 so an Ebersol himself. Being a man of his word, Hflnleided to keep his promise to Leah on that. MniTiage? Well, I'll be puttin' a stop to that!" There was ^Hlil lire in Peter's eyes at the mention of a possible wed^H involving the two families.

^Bh<I whs aghast at Peter's vehement response. Such aniBJly lie had scarcely seen on the face of any man, let alone BflU Icaring Amish farmer. The rift between Peter Mast and fflim libersol was unmistakably enormous, and Gid cared BBo 1,'c-r himself caught in the middle. He was quick to sugBflhliat perhaps Peter might consider including Jake with M'iolihler's Knob boys heading out to Ohio in two weeks' ^H, "What would ya think of that?"

BKl'iii my son in the trade for the Ohio men?" Peter asked, BHilly seeming to calm a bit as he contemplated the notion.

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"Jah, to settle in and work out there . . . find himself a mate," he said, wanting Peter to be clear on what he might agree to.

Peter looked pointedly at him. "If it's true my son's courtin' an Ebersol, I'll be thinking hard on this."

Mighty eager to depart now, Gid remarked that Hannah was waiting supper for him and excused himself to head back to his horse and buggy. . . and home. Back to the peace of my house, he thought, shuddering from the intensity of the encounter.

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H^V111,iini's bedroom was tidy because she could not stand for kityiliin?: less than perfectly clean. Her bureau was kept ^Bfd, cwn polished, and the handmade doilies were washed ^HlhHirJ frequently. She liked to make her bed just as soon ^Hu' slipped out of it of a morning, and her floor was free of ^H bunnies and cobwebs, even beneath the bed, a fact she ^Hvcy proud

of. She'd often thought what an exceptional ^^fkceper she would be for her husband and family some BpFdny a ^mily she'd hoped to have with Jake. But now, as Be In-ld the letter from him in her trembling hands, reading m iij-jnin for the tenth time since its arrival days ago, she felt tlhii hope was dimmed . . . if not gone.

I Vdr Lyddie,

I'm sorry to write in a letter the things I want to say to your face, but 1 have no other choice.

First of all, I apologize that I couldn't attend the singing at your neighbor's place recently. I wanted to . . . really, 1 did.

Please, you must believe me, Lyddie. I have nothing to do with this painful separation. My father is entirely opposed to

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my hope of marrying this fall. Somehow he is privy to who you are, although 1 was not the one to inform him. It has come to his ears that I am seeing one of Abram Ebersol's daughters, and my father, who, as you know, has always looked unkindly on your father and your family, is insisting I go to Ohio. His response was worse than I feared I see that 1 was right in wanting to keep our love secret from him till our wedding day, if necessary. I am so sorry.

Lydiann, I love you and always will. I know this as sure as my name is Jacob Mast. Please don't cry for me once I'm gone to Ohio, my dear girl, because I will come back to Pennsylvania someday. For now, though, I am expected to establish myself in the home of an Amish family, begin working, and court girls from that area. I know this is terrible to have to tell you. Truth is, I refuse to either court or marry anyone but you, my darling. You are the bride of my heart. I will simply work hard in Holmes County until I am of age; then I will return for you.

Will you wait for me? I know this is the most awful thing that could have ever happened to two people so in love.

I will not forget you. When I arrive where I'm intended to go, I'll send you another letter. Please pardon my father for this. I must attempt to forgive him, too. Meanwhile I must try to figure out a way to earn his blessing on our future marriage, years from now.

: All my love,

Jake

Lydiann stared at the letter through her tears. She already missed him and was feeling on the verge of collapse, as if someone had chopped off a supporting limb. Her heart was wounded and forlorn ... all because of an ugly problem between Jake's father and her own.

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I I'nr Hurc and for certain, she could not begin to compreppiul what would have made Jake's father choose to have him I"" llit" young men being herded off to Ohio. What sort of | > i '! would do such a thing? Would Peter Mast have decided

I < ml his son away if she wasn't the girl he loved? Could in' ll'nv' been spared this terrible thing if he'd fallen in love pll'h, stiy, Uncle Jesse Ebersol's daughter, maybe? All too well, Hit* knew I he answer.

| l.ydlann rose and went to the bureau and shoved the letter iH'p Into ii drawer, wishing she'd never turned sixteen this I" i Npring . . . wishing she were still as young and naive as IIh > liiy before she went to her first singing and fell hard for

I1 'i ii Iclrlill Jacob Mast.

I 11 earing of Lydiann's dejection from both Hannah and Runt Lizzie, Mary Ruth visited Lyddie every other day, offer-

111)! her company, even going so far as to invite Lydiann to Ipi-tul some time with Robert and her, "just to get away a bit." I I'ml Lydiann Refused, saying she wanted to stay close to lii'inr, near Mamma and Abe. Still, Mary Ruth couldn't get Iyer how beside herself Lydiann was for one so young. Her Hdrr must be broken, she thought as she sat on Lydiann's bed, linking now at her young sister's tear-streaked face. I "I can scarcely eat," Lyddie told her, sitting in the upright hue chair across the room. "I miss him so." I She sighed sadly, remembering well how troubled she had Ken when Elias Stoltzfus died. "I felt the same way once," pie admitted. ;\ ' ' . ..; ' \ ;;;, ' ' ;

' "You did, sister?" : ;-,.:V, :-,\;~: : ; .!;' :...]": ..-. : :;-:

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Mary Ruth nodded and began to tell Lydiann of her dear friend and first beau, explaining how he had been killed in an accident, though leaving out the part that Robert had been the one whose car had struck Elias's pony cart.

When she was finished, Lydiann was crying all the harder, and Mary Ruth went to her, reaching down to kiss her cheek. "Oh, Lyddie, I never would've told you all this if I had thought it would upset you so."

"No, no, it's a gut thing ya did, prob'ly." She looked up ;it Mary Ruth with the saddest, bluest eyes. "I needed to heai that someone else had such a dreadful thing happen to them and yet could still smile, years later." Lydiann got up and pui her arms around Mary Ruth, clinging to her as if she mighi slip from her grasp. "Denki, sister."

Holding Lyddie was the best help she felt she could offer, so she let her sister cry in her arms, for as long as need be ... just as Leah and Mamma and Aunt Lizzie had always cornforted her. All of them would continue to surround Lydiann, with their love, if possible making up for the powerful sadness.

"The Lord Jesus cares for you," she whispered.

Lydiann moved her head as if to say she knew that was true. "Mamma Leah prays for me every day," she murmured.

"I do, too," said Mary Ruth, hoping God's love would touch Lydiann during her time of misery.²⁸⁹ L[^] -ft,-a- -rp 'te'-i' Jft"l[^]4--i

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pi nil way Co Smitty's, Abram felt the warm breeze on his face Ilii I brail bed in a whiff of the barnyard. He fixed his gaze on I'i kbii'd Pond, shimmering in the distance, and recalled the j i<<r day he'd found Abe unconscious on the ice. His son mU)oiuiuvJ back to normal, which had made him a believer [^]H[^]iyci all those years ago. That and his wonderful-good [^]onship with Lizzie. No question, the Lord had bestowed [^]HtiKs 11 (ion him . . . upon each member of his family,

[^]HK' just wished God might reach down now and pull up [^]Bidos of Lydiann's mouth, helping her to smile again. [^]Hni whs aware of her gloominess, yet knew from Lizzie WEf fhnl a young man had gone off to Ohio, instead of staymil Ininu' and courting Lyddie as he'd set out to do. Sadie, in", hud seemed awfully down in the dumps recently, and llihniik'h he'd asked Lizzie about that, as well, she hadn't nli'iod nny answers.

I I huh was, his house was full up with women who had a flu ile range of emotions, and he'd learned over the years to

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keep a safe distance at particular times. It did seem, though, that if one woman was tetchy, there was bound to be at least one other of a similar mindset. The hitch was, of course, thai he had three adult women and one courting-age daughter all living together under the same roof.

He grinned at the thought as he approached Smitty's pas ture now, having reached the edge of the cornfield. It was :i very good thing his twins had found themselves fine husbands. For certain, he didn't care to imagine what daily life would be like with all six of the women in his life residing at the Ebersol Cottage, for goodness' sake.

Both Leah and Dat preferred to wait until the last possible minute before fetching a gas lamp on summer evenings, waiting till just past dusk for some artificial lighting in the house. Tonight Leah made her way out to the utility room to get one of the tall lamps, scarcely able to see as she went.

She had noticed Lydiann sitting clear back in the dark corner by herself as the rest of the family all sat around the table, enjoying Dat's reading from the Bible and the cake she'd baked for supper. She had been careful not to make hot water sponge cake, which had been served at the farewell meal for the boys heading off to Ohio. She had no desire to remind Lydiann in any way of that particular Sunday, hard as it had been for all of the People. For the past three weeks she couldn't help but observe how crestfallen Lyddie had looked since Jake Mast had left with the others all of it her doing. Yet what other choice had she?

Leah had always loathed self-pity, but she completely

291 pitiprehi'tKled where Lydiann was coming from. The girl thltlnKly
Ilsiti no interest in battling her emotions, and she liukl not hide her anguish, especially from those who loved in', Si it I it; had tried to cheer her up to no avail; even Abe had krJ Leah if there was something wrong with Lyddie "She's I|M loo quiet," he'd said.

I ' -he's entitled to be sad, since we pulled the rug out from underI She, Sadie, and Gid had never bothered to consult with lyiliiinn but had, instead, taken matters into their hands and pi rd in what they all agreed was her best interest. Yet right liiw, looking at her, Leah questioned their approach it riiiril nothing could soothe her girl. And although Leah wllrvt'tl in her heart that Jake's leaving was for the best, she lit I worry Lyddie might never get over his seeming abandonhen I oi her.

I She began to clear away the dishes, thinking all the while If whal might bring a smile to Lydiann's face . . . Sadie's, as

I1 II. She was reminded of some of the new boys from Ohio; |\ i-nil of them had taken an obvious shining to Lydiann at

In* lirst Preaching service after their arrival. Leah had been

I

Norry as she could be to watch the light in their eyes fade

Ihcn Lyddie politely looked the other way. Of course, it was |>i> curly to encourage her girl in that direction much too

in >M

I I he glow from the gas lamp was altogether cheery now as I i ;isi large shadows of each of the family members onto the lu will I. The steady warmth of the lamp offered security and I hii of comfort.

I .lust as the presence of God's love lights pur pathway, Leah In'light. . , , '."

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"O Lord God, help me understand why Jake left me behind," Lydiann prayed beneath the massive branches of the thornless honey-locust tree. She still remembered the first time Mamma had ever brought her and Abe up to these woods, to what she called her "special piece of earth."

"It's one of the most restful spots I know," Mamma had told them. Today Lydiann was finding out for herself yet again that most always what Mamma said was true.

I'm so alone, Lord . . . remembering when Jake was my own, and I was his.

She recalled those things Sadie had shared with her years ago regarding Leah's romance with Jonas Mast how his joining the Gobbler's Knob church and then not staying put here had caused him to be shunned. Because of Jonas's subsequeni estrangement from them, the Masts were still angry with Le;ili and all of them. Was that the only reason Peter Mast despisei I the thought of her being Jake's bride?

Lydiann was grateful to receive Jake's love letters several each week. She answered each one of them often right here, beneath the tree that had so

often comforted Mamma Leah in the past.

This day, she took out her stationery and pen and, once again, told Jake of her steadfast love. I'll love you no matter where you are, she wrote. Ohio or Indiana, or Pennsylvania. Where you are doesn't matter as much as the state of our hearts, ain't so?

She meant every word she wrote beneath the shade of this old and very rare tree, and she could scarcely wait for many years to fly, till Jake would send for her or, better yet, return home for her. An eternity away to be sure.

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Hy 11 ii* lime Jonas redded up his woodworking shop and
til lor the day, he was eager to get home. A fine supper
-ill! uwnir him, and he happily wondered what delicious
i Klliliiii had cooked for him today. Coming from a long
til terrific cooks, Emma seemed to derive great joy from
i Hiring lusty meals, even feasts, nearly every evening. He
i fr H|iiennly told her that simple fare was fine with him,
Uniinii thrived on cooking and baking the fancier the
t'f, Most of their neighbors took their big meal at noon,
iltuv lie had quite a ride to his shop, which he rented
ii nn old farmer friend, Jonas was satisfied with a good
Iwit'll or two at that hour. Maybe that was the reason why
ihiii seemed to want to outdo herself come supper. He

"It's I, thinking of her affectionately. What a kind and gentle woman she was, always considering him.

It was as he reined the horse into the lane that he noticed her buggy parked near the side yard. His good friend her Sol Raber hailed from the house. "Jonas, hullo!" the Hy man called. "Come see him, Jonas jumped out of his carriage. "What is in all the way to the sticks?"

"Oh, I thought you might want to take a young man under wing, is all."

"Why, sure," he said, not waiting to hear just who might be looking for some pointers in cabinetmaking.

Sol continued on to say he'd recently met one of the

young men traded from Pennsylvania. "He's just hankerin' for me gut fellowship with a master carpenter, as he says. Naturally I thought of you first, Jonas." ";; ;;

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"If he's hardworking, I surely could use some young help."

Sol grinned, showing his teeth. "Fine and dandy," he said. "I'll bring him out first thing tomorrow. How's that?"

"I'll look forward to it."

"I think the two of you will get along fine," Sol said. " 'Specially bein' he's a Mast, same as you."

"How 'bout that?" Jonas found this news altogether inter' esting. "Where's the youngster from in Pennsylvania, anyway?"

"Lancaster County."

"Plenty of Masts round there." He reached for the bridle. "What's his first name?"

"Jake."

He stood up and scratched his head, suddenly bone weary. "Jake, ya say?"

"Jah, and this one's mighty young to be gone from family." Sol took off his straw hat and wiped his brow with his blue paisley kerchief. "Honestly, he says he's downright miserable came out here against his will. Guess his pop wanted to get him away from the girl he loves for some reason or other."

Jonas turned just then, deliberately looking at the acres of tall corn across the dirt road.

"You all right, there, Jonas?"

He patted his horse's neck. "I'll look forward to meetin' this Jake fella."

Sol pressed his hat back down on his head and made for his own carriage and horse. "See ya tomorrow, then."

"Have a gut evening, Sol." With that Jonas offered a confident wave and set about unhitching his horse.

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IW 1111 the arrival of September, Lydiann found more relief h winking alongside Abe outdoors than inside the crowded Blouse She was glad to help where she could, especially with Bui complaining more often about aches and pains. Besides, he other women of the house were far better at scaring up a UniKT. Lydiann preferred to write wonderful-good letters to Hi'i Caraway beau, reminding him of her love for him as often In Ik- did her.

She found hesself continually checking the mailbox, even innning her ear for their postman, ever so eager for more word ll'Din Ohio. Jake had written in his very last letter that he was doing some work with a "right fine woodworker one with I In' same last name as my own." He looked on it as quite providential, especially since master woodworkers were few tind far between here in Lancaster County. His happiness at this turn of events made Lydiann both pleased and a little sad. Pleased that he was finding plenty to keep his hands busy Until such a time as he could return to her . . . and sad because he feared he just might get himself too attached to either

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Ohio or the friendly Mast woodworker.

Today she intended to take twenty minutes from her morning chores to write another letter to Jake so she could get it tucked into the mailbox before the mail was picked up this afternoon.

"What're ya thinking 'bout now7." Abe asked her when they'd hauled the milk cans to the milk house.

"Nothin' much."

"Like foolin', you're not." He eyed her curiously. "You're thinking 'bout that beau of yours, ain't so? The one who up and left ya."

She sucked in air quickly. "Mind your own business!"

Abe frowned, staring hard at her. "What's a-matter, Lyddie? Ya don't have to bite my head off."

She had a mind to ignore him and she did.

"I've heard things . . . from some of the other fellas, ya know," Abe said.

She nodded. " 'Spect you have." She tensed up, worried he'd come right out and ask her something about Jake specifically make her admit to his knowing whom it was she loved.

"Some of my friends are asking 'bout ya," he said. "A few are downright sweet on you, Lyddie."

She turned and glared at him, the little brother who'd become a young teenager before her eyes. Tall like Sadie and nearly as blond, Abe was good-looking in anyone's opinion. She didn't know for sure if she ought to say what she was thinking, but she did anyway. "I know our cousin Essie Ebersol is sweet on you, but would I have come right out and said it without thinking?" she hollered over her shoulder. Then she blew out a long sigh. "Truth is, when ya start to learn

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Mill nik'Ii ihings who likes whom and all of that it's really

MM liir yini 10 be sayin'. Don't you know anything?"

I I Ir slink out his tongue. "Puh!"

' ' 11 it* iliyy you ever think twice before talkin'. . . well,

|l ii II hi- a right fine one, if I must say so!"

1 I'm'I ore she might up and shed a tear, she started for the
I 11 nif,; shed to cry her eyes out in peace. She wouldn't have
It 11 mi easily upset, except she was missing Jake something
Liui

I When at last she'd pulled herself together, Lydiann Wtfileil for the chicken house, where she felt altogether hopeft* an she scattered feed to the clucking hens and the solitary

IftHNler, : ' ' ;,., - ,.v -:-

I On Jake's second visit to Jonas's cabinetmaking shop, Bill ike the first, the two of them quickly got to talking. Jake Binned less perturbed at having been unwillingly sent so far Vi ini home. In fact, it appeared to Jonas that Jake settled in In I he day as if he were visiting an old friend. With their nuluil Lancaster County connection and same last name, gnus was curious to know more about Jake's family. "What's Vnir father do?" he asked.

P "I Ic owns an apple orchard in a place called Grasshopper
l.t'vrl. Ain't really a town or a village it's just a raised area
hrlwi-en miles of farmland, southeast of Strasburg."

I Astonished, Jonas stared at Jake. This has to be my baby
tfo'uther! Looking at his nearly grown sibling, he was painfully
[(Wiire of the passage of years, having been cut off from his
?fi titly for nearly sixteen years. Had the Lord God truly
298~ JO e u> e r I if J~~> e tM* L s

brought his youngest brother to his very door?

Jonas said nothing, only watched and listened intently as the sad-eyed teenager went on. "My pop gave me no choice," Jake said, reaching for a hammer and holding it gingerly. "I had to leave home and come here, like it or not."

Jonas found this altogether puzzling. "Did you ever ask why that was?"

Jake laughed quietly. "You don't know my father. He isn't one to be questioned."

Jonas knew someone like that well enough, but the description wasn't one he would have used of his father. For as he knew two such someones: Abram Ebersol and Bishop Bontrager. But there was no sense bringing up the past will) his young friend his brother!

"I'm here 'cause I lacked courage, I s'pose you could say." Holding the hammer in both hands now and frowning down at it, Jake went to sit on the wooden stool near the table saw. "I'm in love with a girl my father doesn't like . . . doesn't approve of her family." He clenched his jaw. "How am I s'posed to feel 'bout that? I can't just stop loving her at his say-so."

Jonas studied him as he listened to the all-too-familiar account, drinking in the image of this dark-haired teen before him. Jake had been merely an infant when Jonas was still living at home, so he couldn't be of legal age to marry on his own just yet. No doubt he needed their father's permission to marry, something that had been denied.

"She couldn't be prettier, Jonas, with a down-to-earth sort of grace. Ever know someone like that?"

"Jah, I believe I do." He was thinking now of Emma.

"What do you do when love comes along clear out of the

299Che J^r o d ig a I ";..'

Mil* mid nearly knocks ya off your feet? Do you follow with II nl your heart?"

I lo nodded. "Well, I should say so. Lord willin', of course." Ltlter, iilter Jonas had shown Jake several different tricks I thr trade, he offered to take him back to the family with Im 'in he was staying near Berlin.

"Vnu sure?" Jake's big brown eyes were alight with the"llrl. .,:

"Wouldn't mention it if I wasn't." , :

They had a good chuckle over that and headed out to hllih up the horse and buggy. . , , , ;,,

' adie headed on foot to Ivan and Mary Etta Troyers' pli' -, keeping her promise to help with some heavy cleaning, tin chough several of the older daughters planned to be on ! Hid Co help, as well. Thinking about a family of twelve a I i-foct" dozen she wondered what it would be like to raise i' I) youngsters as she made her way toward the Troyers' farmIn nine not too far down from the Kauffmans' spread. Not only lisl ll seem unfair that some women had no trouble giving I il'll) lo one healthy baby after another, but she had also I i Minn lo second-guess Jake's going to Ohio. As far as she was Miuvmed, it might as well be China, or some other country

11.ill way around the world.

She rubbed her neck, realizing anew how upset she still

.vi finding and losing her precious son all within the space

I a few weeks. Every now and then, she recalled how she had

heard" her baby crying all those months after she birthed

I min, Ac the time she'd thought she was losing her mind, but

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presently she wondered if God had been trying to tell her all those years ago that Jake was very much alive.

Now she let her eyes take in the trees and pastureland, sighing crossly. Never would there be another chance to anonymously spend time with her boy, let alone talk with him one-on-one as she longed to. How she wished to share the truth of who she was with him. Who he was to her!

She refused to let herself cry not here on the road in plain view of Englishers driving past in their fancy cars. Today she must be in control of her emotions, not allow her misgivings to take over again. She must try to demonstrate the kind of pluckiness Leah seemed to have cultivated over time, despite her own heartaches. Just last night Sadie had talked with Leah, who indicated that when sorrowful things happen to people who are the children of God, they can either run to the Lord and seek after His presence, or they can pray and plead for God to remove the struggles so their life might be happy once again. "But don't be mistaken," Leah had warned, "it is not the easy or contented life that makes folk hunger hard after the Lord Jesus."

Even so Sadie wasn't sure she was ready to fully surrender her wants and wishes to the Lord God. Feelings of anger and resentment still raged within her toward Dr. Schwartz and toward God, too, for allowing the doctor to do what he'd done. Sure, she could observe Leah's joyfulness all day long, but she didn't understand where it came from. It seemed somehow sorrow Leah encountered in her life, the more peaceful, even content, she was. Sadie wished she, too, might experience such a miraculous reaction to the sad circumstances swirling around her, but she wasn't convinced a closer walk with God was the way for that to happen. When she prayed

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in nil, (the- much preferred to beseech Him to bring her son umir Id Ikt. It was only in that event that her happiness Li hilil Ih- restored.

I I he lush green of grassy hills and treed hollows was never Ml* minn' lo Jonas, even though he took this way to work each H|iJ every weekday, and oftentimes Saturdays. He enjoyed the Mllr on the back roads of his second

home in Apple Creek, his Grasshopper Level would always be first in his heart. A winding dirt road led to one lumberyard after another, Amish schoolhouses and white clapboard houses with porches three deep built onto the main house, till clusters of mailboxes for as many families as Millers and Hufstetters. There, vast hayfields were frequently misty with gray haze at dawn, and golden fields were dotted with oat shocks, as well as large well-kept red barns with green roofs and miles in miles of whitewashed horse fencing. He never took a bit in his striking, colorful scenery for granted. The road to town dipped and turned, making for some interesting conversation as Jake compared the landscape to that in Lancaster County.

"I'm gonna miss the apple harvest back home," Jake commented, and then said that another big reason he had decided being sent out here was having to leave behind his twin sister, Mandie. "Her name's Amanda, really, but she [nearly gets called that anymore."

What should I say? Jonas's mind whirled mighty fast as his brother once again happened on the subject of their family.

How much does Jake know about me? Anything?

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Difficult as it was, he decided he would not reveal his identity just yet, for he feared Jake might not even know he existed, due to the Ban imposed by Bishop Bontrager. Even if Jake had heard of his wayward older brother, there was a real possibility the lad might not want to fellowship with him any longer, preferring to follow the strict shunning slapped on Jonas. There was no way in this world he was going to ruin their growing friendship.

Yet again Jonas wondered what he had done to merit the divine blessing of being reunited with one of his family. So full was his heart, he could scarcely hold on to the reins.

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He noticed almost immediately Lydiann's freshly scrubbed hair and the combed hair neatly tucked beneath her head [] linjj;. Watching from the front room window, she was |i i ' iiware of the boost of energy in Lydiann's stride this H' inoon as she hurried out to the mailbox. She's surely eager | 11'old. from Jake, thought Leah, wondering how long he

He clung to Lydiann, especially when he had been admonI >< i{ liy his bishop, even Gid, to mingle with Ohio girls. No II Mil it Peter Mas^ shared the same desire. But if what she susI" ii-d was true, Jake had dismissed their urging, steadfastly lii lying in contact with Lydiann. Often, Leah had seen her, l" n and paper in hand, heading off toward the woods after

In pits, just as she herself had when writing to Jonas so long I

When Lydiann came running in the back door, calling for her, Leah anxiously went to see what was on her mind. "Maniina, listen to what my beau wrote to me!" : ,, . , I Surprised, she asked, "Ach, Lyddie, are ya ever so,sure you Itynnt lo share this?"

ly J3e

"'Tis all right, really. I know you'll keep quiet, ain't?" Lydiann began to read from Jake's most recent letter as soon as they'd settled down at the kitchen table.

Leah was taken with the expression in Lyddie's voice as she related one interesting thing after another, pleased that her girl should entrust this very personal moment to her. . . yet sobered that Lyddie's affection for Jake did not appear to have lessened.

As the letter came to a close, Lydiann's voice became softer. Then, she looked up, still holding the letter. "I best not read further."

Leah nodded, struggling with a lump in her throat. She loathed having to pretend as if she didn't know anything about how and why Lyddie's beloved had ended up being sent away.

"He cares for me, Mamma." Lydiann brushed tears from her face. "What am I s'posed to do 'bout that?"

Unable to advise, Leah merely reached out a hand. "I'm awful sorry, dear. Truly I am. I hope you can trust the Lord for your future."

"Is that what you had to do, too, Mamma? After Jonas left here:

She inhaled sharply. "Jonas?"

"Remember, Sadie told me 'bout him and you quite a while back."

Leah didn't care so much to talk about what she'd put behind her. There was no need to rehash the old days, especially when Jonas was the last person she wanted Lydiann to be asking about just now.

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I I nvrly and peaceful, that's what Mary Ruth thought of IHn pin I iaihir September morning as she drove the car to visit yydlnnn. She hadn't stopped by to see her youngest sister in Ktnt'c lli;in a week, and she wanted to gauge for herself how Kytlluun was coping.

[_ More than anything, she wanted to pass on the encourf(il)H things she was learning in Scripture; she'd even tucked tiro Ik'r dress pocket a slip of paper with sermon notes from it'll Sunday. She wouldn't press the issue, of course, but she

I1 ujiny hoped the Lord might make it possible for her to I.|" .ik privately with Lydiann. That and maybe offer a quiet lii.iyi-r lor her.

I When she parked the car in the driveway and switched off In' ignition, Abe came running out from the barn to greet "11 i. "Hullo!" he called, peering inside the driver's side of the

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"I low are you?" she asked, unable to open the door with AI if now hanging nearly inside the open window, reaching to

11H nil I he steering wheel, a curious grin on his face. "I think yi hi best keep your eyes on driving horse and buggy," she said, le-.i I)at accuse hex of promoting worldly interests in his only Kin.

"Aw, don't worry 'bout that. I know plenty of boys who have cars . . . hide 'em from their fathers."

She didn't like the sound of this at all and was glad when A he stepped back so she could climb out of the driver's seat ,u id head for the house. But Abe was trailing right behind her, not ready to let the topic drop.

"How fast do ya think your car can go?" he asked. "How quick can it get to top speed from a dead stop, I mean?"

"Now, Abe..." ., ..-....

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: "I'm serious," he replied. "I want to know." ..-

She shook her head. "I have no idea about any of that."

Evidently disappointed, Abe sat down on the back steps, and she made her way inside.

In the kitchen she found Leah and Lydiann working side by side, stirring up two large fruit salads. One was to be served at dinner and the other was to take to Miriam Peachey, sluwas told.

Mary Ruth wondered about the latter, and Lydiann explained Miriam was under the weather. "That bein' tincase, I wanted to do something nice for her and Smitty."

Sitting down on the wood bench, Mary Ruth was glad for a chance to catch her breath. Without asking, Lydiann brought her a glass of iced tea. "Denki," she said, glad for it, even though the day wasn't nearly as hot as it had been in past weeks.

"Won't be long now and school will be startin' up again," Lydiann mentioned, sitting down next to her. "Will you lie missin' your students?"

"Well, yes and no."

Leah smiled and came over to the table with some crackers and several varieties of cheese on a plate. "You'll have one of your own little pupils to look after, 'fore too long."

"A new little one in the family," Lydiann said, eyes sparkling with her words. "I'll baby-sit whenever you want just so long as it isn't twins. I'm not sure I could keep up with two babies the same age." Suddenly a shadow fell over her face, as if something had brought back a sad memory.

Leah quickly changed the subject to plans she had for making several crib quilts for the new baby. ;

"That's real nice of you," Mary Ruth told Leah then to

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Htiliinn, n!h- said, "Rest assured I'm having only one baby."

H "I A! When did ya learn this?" Leah asked, keeping her

^mi f low ;iikI glancing toward the back door.

H "The midwife told me yesterday." Mary Ruth sighed. "I do

Hii^VC Robert is somewhat relieved, as well."

Heard then they heard a sneeze coming from the back steps,
Mary Ruth put her hand on her chest. "Goodness, is Abe
in outside?"

Leah hopped up quickly and went to check, only to return
with a grin on her face. "You guessed quite right," she said.
"I look off runnin' toward the barn just now, but you can
bet both Dat and Gid will soon know it's a single baby
in."

"-lull I ,
Mary Ruth reached for a second cracker with two small
of cheese on top. "That's all right with me." She
saw Lydiann, eager to talk with her alone, but the
"in-m" never presented itself, and after a piece of apple pie,
she said her farewell to her sisters.

"in-onie again soon," Leah called as Mary Ruth made her way to the car.
"h, I ill," she replied, noticing Lydiann making a quick dash toward the
road.

The familiar squeal of brakes from out on the main road told Mary Ruth it
was time for the mail.

Leah heard Lydiann run into the house, and when she returned, she saw her
waving a letter, already opened.

"Lisien to this!" Lydiann plopped herself back down on
ilip boiu'li and began to read, nearly breathless with excite-
i.i^nt. "'Hear Lydiann,'" she began. "'I have the most inter-
i Ing news. You know I've written in the past about the

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woodworking shop in Apple Creek. Well, I've made quite a discovery one I
think you'll be surprised at, too. You sec, I've been working alongside my
eldest brother all this time . . . and didn't even know it."

"Wait just a minute. Would ya mind readin' that last line again?" Leah
interrupted, her heart in her throat. :

Lydiann stared at her for a moment, frowning a bit, and then she raised the
letter to reread it.

"Oh my. . ." Leah groaned.

"Mamma, did I upset you?"

"No . . . no. Is there more you want to share?" ','

Lydiann nodded. "I read this on the way in from the mailbox . . . and,
honestly, if Jonas Mast isn't the one givin' woodworking pointers to my
Jake."

Leah felt her hands trembling now. "Well, for goodness' sake," she
whispered, not sure how to respond in the least.

"Can ya believe it?" asked Lydiann. "His own shunned brother."

Quickly Leah gathered her composure. "The Bann on Jonas is not for us to
speak of." She wanted to say she'd never felt it was his fault. . . yet it wasn't

for her to question the man of God, especially not in front of Lydiann. Truly, she had mixed emotions about the whole situation.

Trying to occupy herself, Leah offered Lydiann a glass of iced tea, but she was once again caught up in her letter. Leah sipped her own cold drink and breathed a silent prayer.

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lliinnrth was anxious to write in her journal as her husband tiul ('irls lay sleeping soundly, bringing peace to the small

muse.

Friday, September 28 Pear Diary,

It is nearly nine-thirty tonight, -jet I can't sleep I'm ever so sure I am expecting another baby. We've waited so many years for this day, the thought doesn't frighten me in the least, especially becatee I made a good number of visits to Old Lady I lamer before she died last week. The People turned out in large numbers for the funeral, but it was clear to me who was there paying their respects and who wasn't. Dat and Lizzie did not attend, nor did my sisters, all of them honoring Dat's stand against powwowing except me. Gid did happen to say on the long ride over to the funeral that he was beginning to see Dat's side of things, but he didn't go any further than that. These days it sounds to me as if Dat has much more sway over Gid than his own father does Gid talks often of "Abram this and Abram that." Seems to me Gid has embraced my father as nearly his own. , : ' . ; ' ,) : : ; . .

-lu e

All the same, 1 don't think he knows how much my father and stepmother tend to read the Bible, even study it. But 1 figure what Gid doesn't know about that won't be a nuisance to him if the bishop should ever ask. It's best to leave things be as they are, just as nobody kept me from going to Old Lady Henner all these years.

If I truly am in the family way, 1 hope to have yet another baby not so long after this one so he or she can have a closein-age sibling. But I won't fret about when the Good Lord wants to send along our children to us, though I would like to give Gid a boy this time.

And 1 am awful happy for Mary Ruth, who is looking forward to her first wee one at the end of next month. What fun it will be to hold my twin's newborn in my arms! Mary Ruth will be a wonderful-good mother, for she has always had a strong leaning toward infants and little children . . . and she had all that practice with Carl Nolt when he was tiny.

Well, with Old Lady Henner gone, I don't believe I'll be seeking out a hex doctor anymore. 1 never cared much at all for the ones who are men they give me the jitters. Now it will be for me to simply follow more closely the folk medicine

on my own.

Respectfully, : Hannah

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An early October throng of ladybugs rose like a great mist and then settled on the sunny-most side of the barn the first Saturday of the month. Leah had observed them in flight while taking down some washing that couldn't wait till Monday, all sun dried and bright from hanging on the line that

BLHfnlnu ninl part of the afternoon. At the sight of the insects, M Wlntlelnl whether an awful harsh winter might be inHftithin year.

^^Lydlann and Ida Mae and Katie Ann were away at Central ^HkcM In downtown Lancaster, tending table to a host of yel^^llM'iin^c, white, and lime gourds, along with piles of prized ^HftklnN slushed from the vines just yesterday. The trip was ^Hrul, long ride by horse and buggy, to be sure. Still, Leah ^Hfil Nomeone other than herself might have witnessed the ^Hlgc sight, knowing Lydiann and the girls would have been ^^Bllly surprised at hundreds of ladybugs seeking out shelter ^^hc coming winter. No doubt the insects had found it ^Hni' the loose slats on the south side of the old bank barn. ^H'turrying across the backyard with her wicker basket, its ^^tMils nearly spilling over, she spied the ladybugs again. ^Hcdiaivly she got to wondering if Dat and Gid had split ^HptiU'kcd ample firewood to carry both families through the I'M diiys come late October and beyond.

1 < ktober. The word played in her mind with the energy of It I'Minn (ire before it quiets down and begins to smolder. Dat In 1.1 Abe had lit the first such fire of the season just this morn|f% having spent hours raking up dead tree boughs and limbs IH preparation, tidying things up in general. Sunlight seemed l|i leak out of the first weeks of autumn, and yet the vast win ids to the northwest grew brighter by day, especially where IJu- maples were set against ancient hemlocks. I I Icr thoughts flew to Lydiann, who continued to sulk HI i ii in* I the house as though her last friend had died when ll'u'iv wasn't a new letter to be had, that is. Faithfully Leah l|ient time in prayer each morning on the subject of Jake maNC, asking that he might stay put in Ohio. Asking, too, that

Lydiann might eventually become interested in a different young man.

With the slowing down winter would bring, Lydiann would soon have plenty of nurturing from the whole family long fireside chats with Leah, evening prayers with Dat, playing table games with Lizzie and Abe. And knowing Lyddie as Leah did, she had reason to believe the dear girl would not pine for Jake forever. At least she hoped not.

Sadie was astonished when Lydiann came running in the back door saying she'd received another letter in the after noon mail delivery.

In a whisper, Lydiann told her, "If you keep it quiet, Sadie, I'll tell ya who my beau is. I'll even read ya a bit of his letter."

"Aw, no, that ain't necessary," Sadie said immediately, glancing at Leah, who stood behind Lydiann. Sadie had recently suspected her youngest sister of sharing Jake's letters with Leah, although Leah had not revealed this in anything she'd said. Still, Sadie assumed she was right, as unusually close as Lydiann and Leah were. Certainly Leah had seemed to have more on her mind here lately.

"But I want to tell ya, honestly I do." And Lydiann revealed, right then and there, that the boy she loved was indeed Jake Mast. "And he loves me, too," she said, eyes twinkling.

Sadie was speechless at Lydiann's willingness to make known her beloved's identity, though she was grateful to have an opportunity to hear the kinds of things her son wrote and

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and how he phrased his thoughts. It was a small way to feel

! near to him.

As her arm was already scanning her letter. At once she

was reading to herself and announced, "Ach, listen to

that. Jake writes that his eldest brother, Jonas, lives clear out

IU| ilip i/uiiniry, where he boards and rooms with an older lady

^H| In ;ilinost completely deaf. I guess he thinks of her

^HIIy , . . us almost a family member, since he's never married

^HliihI ;i family of his own."

HP"Whiii on earth?" Sadie said, bewildered. "You mean to

s |nkr knows of Jonas . . . and Jonas isn't married?" She

|l. I fil now at Leah. Her sister's lips were parted, as if in

lil'iH k, but she remained silent.

I l.ydinnn refolded the letter. "Sure sounds like it, ain't?"

I "Well, I should say this is quite amazing," she breathed.

I'll it's I rue."

I "|uh, 'tis ever so surprising" was all Leah said.

I "You all right?" Sadie placed a hand on Leah's slender

mIh Milder. Evidently overcome with unexpected emotion, Leah

In nvi d her head, and Sadie felt her precious sister tremble at

in- astonishing mews. , , ,

Leah slipped away to the Dawdi Haus after Lydiann and i. In- had taken themselves off for a midafternoon walk at her n> isience and following her repeated assurances she was

4* HHJ4 lo be quite all right.

Now, in the solitude of Sadie's small house, she looked ilhuil her, taking in the tiny front room, the hickory rocker, thr simple maple side table and wood settee, all the furnish-

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ings reminding her of Dawdi John. This room where she\ I spent much time getting to know her grandfather, asking him questions about his courtship days . . . and sharing with him some about her own.

Incapable of grasping the implications of what Lydiann had revealed not thirty minutes ago, Leah felt terribly restless and walked to the open front door, welcoming the scents and gentle breezes of early autumn. There she recalled how Jonas had gently carried her into his father's house after she'd wrenched her ankle playing volleyball, how his strong arms had made her feel cared for and secure. Truly, there was so much to remember: The early years of stolen glances at family get-togethers, the summertime picnics on the lawn, the dear betrothal promise they'd made as youngsters, a love covenant to be sure. She remembered fondly the day of their church baptism, the long afternoon afterward spent sharing intimately while sitting in the grassy meadow, his sweet kiss on her lips. Dozens of Ohio letters had traveled between them . . . followed by the heartache of the years when she had naively believed Sadie had stolen him away.

Early on in those painful days, she had met with the Lord God in a very personal way up in the woods, realizing that she was and always would be God's Leah, that the dear Lord Jesus would mend her heart in due time and fulfill His plans and will for her life. Now the unexpected news that Jonas had remained single, just as she had, was almost more than she could comprehend or bear.

Standing there, Leah was relieved to be alone with her thoughts. Glad, too, that both Dat and Aunt Lizzie had m>l been present in the kitchen earlier. It had been hard enough

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k In iliI lirr emotions in check with Sadie and Lydiann staring

|i! mil m;iking over her.

I rii;liiii|.; into the stillness, she breathed her silent ques-

|l< in, M v beloved, what things do you recall? Will you ever know

111. 11 I ,1111 (Hid always will be your Leah?

I In In! heart she knew this was so. She had always loved

b> i ., no matter how long she'd tried to fool herself into

| In vini; differently.

i Yet even in this hushed moment of reflection and inner

|n I nowldgment, she was not so sure Jonas would care that

||h wns still a maidel. How could she possibly know what he

jv i I hinking ... or if he was even aware that she, too,

|> in.lined unmarried?

I "1'ufining, she wandered back into the house, to the

In hen doorway looking out to the barn and up toward the

Klule load.

I All the happy days . . .

I Through the simple act of faithful living, Leah had |c ii ned the most important thing not to cling to or to chase Ilii i luippiness. What she yearned for now was the heavenli'iii joy that carried her through, even in the midst of suffer-

I h'sus is the joy of my life, she thought anew.

I She had come to know and live this truth from reading
Ivinmma's Bible, and she'd attempted to teach it to Lydiann
Itul Abe.

I I Vopping to her knees beside the small kitchen table, she
I1.1nked the heavenly Father for not only her many blessings,
nil lor all of life's difficulties that had led her to this amazing

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moment. . . although she had no idea what to do with hu knowledge of
Jonas. But that was not for her to decide. She would do as the Scriptures
instructed and wholly trust tinLord-

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1/ \n enormous relief came over Jonas on Monday morning IH'Iii'ii lu'
opened the door to the woodworking shop and Iflifie, once again, stood his
youngest brother on the stoop.

I j |c I tut. I wondered if perhaps Jake had gotten his fill of instruo

111*hi, so intense Jonas had been the last time Jake spent the hvnikiliiy
bere. Intense in part because he'd heard things from

It's redialing Leah, whom Jake's girlfriend referred to as just Leah. The notion Leah was now Lydiann's mother had just baffled Jonas. How was it his former sweetheart who'd be raising Lydiann, whom Jonas knew to be Ida's daughter? Sadly there was only one way that could have come to pass, and he was anxious to quiz Jake about it today. He'd be more patient in awaiting answers about the girl he'd found in Gobbler's Knob, yet his heart shouted to know all he could about her, especially since he had come to know she was not, in fact, married to Gideon Peachey. Was she Gid's [widow, perhaps, helping a similarly widowed Abram raise Lydiann/

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Sadie hurried through the connecting door to the main house, to the kitchen, where she made coffee, began to mix eggs and milk for scrambling, and fried up some bacon. She wanted to do something nice for Leah, seeing as how her sister was probably still mulling over the surprising Ohio news.

She waited until the table was laid and Aunt Lizzie had gone outdoors before slipping out of the house herself, wearing only an old sweater for her wrap. Quickly she caught up with Lizzie on the other side of the barn, where she was out taking a short jaunt in the grazing land.

At once she opened her heart to the woman she'd often confided in as a young girl. "I'm hopin' ya might help me get word to Dad's ears somehow. . . about Jonas Mast," she began. She did not plead with fancy words, nor did she fight back tears that threatened to spill. She prayed silently and spoke honestly, hoping a gentle approach might work more effectively than dramatically beseeching Lizzie to do her bidding . . . for dear Leah's sake.

Abram was dressing around for Tuesday morning chores when Lizzie sidled up to him and said, "I have an idea . . . and I want ya to think on it."

"Oh?" He leaned down and kissed her full on the lips. Then, when she tried to wiggle free from his tight embrace, he kissed her again.

"For goodness' sake, Abram!"

He looked at her, all fresh and sweet from a good night's rest. "How was I to know what you had in mind, dear?"

She smiled and went to sit on their bed, her arms folded

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"I've heard tell that Peter Mast's eldest son is as un^Bjli' <l ; .' any man ever was."

F lip lili ihe frown crease his brow. "Well, how on earth I. -<ilij yn know that?"

I I iizlc looked at him with love in her eyes. "My dear r ' > iffl, y> hi host be trustin' me on this," she said. "But I know I ilnni: you could put a smile on more than one person's I ii ii ii u I here if you'd be willin' to write one short letter." I i li> had no idea what she was suggesting and told her so. | 'We've heard from someone in Ohio" and here she j I'd in him, as if to make her meaning clear "who knows | lire that Jonas has never married."

I And just who's that?" he asked, beginning to suspect the

I1 ' .iin for the sadness in Lydiann's eyes.

I "I Xni'l know exactly. . . though I wouldn't tell ya, prob'ly, I I,lid."

I i >h, he loved this spunky wife of his. He walked over to |i> i ,ind raised her up so he could hug the stuffings out of her. I "Think of it, Abram Jonas not hitched up yet," Lizzie Hi'I In his arms. "And Leah still single . . ."

I I Ic ligured out then he was supposed to put it together Ih ii ilk- two of them might yet secretly care for each other.

I1 ih's happiness, according to Lizzie, lay right in his ownLn.k

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I Lizzie was adamant. "Peppermint oil in tea does fight Itilils!" She glanced up at Hannah's girls playing in the haymow as she talked with Lydiann below. "My mother and

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grandmother both said this, and I know from experience \\\ true."

Lydiann sniffled and then pulled out a handkerchief from her dress pocket and sneezed. "This always happens to mo ;ii the beginning of autumn," she complained. "What is it 'boul that?"

"Oh, the change of seasons, I 'spect. Some folk get down right blue when summer turns to fall, and others catch a cold, just like you are. But. . . ya really oughta try some peppermint oil in a cup of tea, I'm tellin' ya."

Obviously uninterested, Lydiann turned up her nose yi-i again.

"All right, then, but don't say I didn't try 'n' help."

"I won't." Lydiann shrugged and headed for the ladder to join her young nieces.

A stubborn sort, she is, thought Lizzie, wishing Lydiann wasn't so much like Sadie had been at this age. But then again, who was she to talk?

Seeing Hannah's girls so playful just now, she thought of Mary Ruth and Robert. She could scarcely wait for their Iim baby to arrive, another grandchild by marriage for her. Sinfelt so full of joy each day, walking and talking with the Lohl Jesus and enjoying the young ones growing up around lu-i Sometimes she felt she ought to pinch herself to see if all I u i dreams had really come true, though she knew they surely had.

Only one thing clouded her happiness, however infrequently. Still, she wouldn't let it rob her peace, but it was something she could never quite shake. She wondered when she ought to finally bring herself to sit down one-on-one with Leah and be done with it. . . reveal everything about lei

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fillings. (V at least all she remembered. She had been taken into account the sorrows and disappointments Leah had lived through those years, not wanting to further hamper her dear ^1 m(ending contentment with the potentially burdensome m'lrd^. She'd thought of asking Abram his opinion on N H' he thought it a good time to consider addressing it n I nth even though he himself was in the dark about the n who'd fathered her one and only child. Truth was, she wouldn't bring herself to reveal this to Abram, either not

; yd,

Hi full bad by no means endeavored to keep up with the

Hill^li in the neighborhood. For one thing, talk of daylight

ni^s lime coming to an end here pretty quick made her

Ii under her breath. Lorraine Schwartz loathed "losing

hi .ii the end of the day," as she liked to say, so it always

II in Leah to change back the settings on their clocks to

! > i ime" come the last Sunday of this month. Seemed odd

I mi, Ifeally, fancy folk wanting to go back and forth like

M, especially since the People never observed "fast time" in

HfnM place.

HShc did as was requested of her all the same, heeding the Hints and wishes of her employers. Both Dr. Schwartz and his H' li;id become accustomed to

her being altogether depend' H, except for the few days, of course, when she had quit her Himii of sheer anger. The problem with working for Dr. Hvviiri'z, whom she'd long seen as an upstanding man, was H wbe no longer viewed him as so good, after all. Leah Retimes wondered if there was something she might do to

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help point him toward the Savior his heart undoubtedly longed for.

As Leah set about dusting the many framed family pictures, taking note that the pictures of Derek as a teen hud been removed and replaced by wedding pictures of Mary Ruth and Robert, she thought how odd it was that the doctor's seo ond grandchild was also to be an Ebersol by blood, though the circumstances were vastly different.

Sighing, she would not allow herself to feel upset for having approached Dr. Schwartz as she had. There had been extreme frustration and sadness in his eyes that day, but also absolute relief, as if the man had been waiting all these years for someone to condemn him!

Well, now that he had finally owned up to the truth, sin1 felt almost sorry for him. Leah hoped she might share the love of the Lord Jesus with him if not in words, then by lktdeeds, . . .;., ,. . ..- -.,. ;., ;.,> .- . ,

Jonas stared down at the unexpected letter Jake had thrust into his hands, quite stunned to see it was from stubborn Abram Ebersol.

Meanwhile Jake tried to explain. "Tell ya the truth, I was mighty surprised gettin' this letter from Lyddie's father, alon^ with a short one from her, too."

Jonas ran his hand through his hair, saying nothing.

"You all right?" Jake stared at him but good.

"Never better." Jonas had to suppress the urge to chuckle, but nothing of what Abram had written had anything to do with Jake. Except without this mighty handsome brother t >l

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l| ttlrlluliiiH here, how long might it have been before Jonas wl hfHfil difv word about Leah ... let alone that she was still I ' l lf I K- slipped the paper into his pants pocket.

iv punned, wanting to get the words out just right. "I P ' it V* 11 i jufl 1 time I find out for myself why you were sent H Ytiui' I id ing here makes no sense to me at all." Jonas

I In linn hand on his brother's shoulder. "Time I heard

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m* Mitilifht from the horse's mouth."

I Jrtpk expressed his wholehearted enthusiasm for the idea, nil 11 nil in hurried to finish the new desk he'd promised to |>i<-i-iotc? by next week. The more Jonas deliberated on it, the I ' ' he pondered how Jake's inclusion with the men who'd (h> irnded none of the others had any complaints, evi-

11111 v -iippeared much like what had happened to him years In i, 11 Mr us he was preparing to wed Leah. I While sanding and smoothing out the wood's surface, he li "i;tilzed that he had no idea what his first step upon his tin11 would be toward Leah. Could he actually show up at Minim's home unannounced and knock on the door? He was Illiinncd man. Even if he were to be so brazen, Leah would P'H'R' to the*Old Ways, he was sure. And knowing Abram, htul not consulted with Leah before writing this brief let-

I Rubbing the wood all the harder, he wondered if Leah KHlId ever want to see him again. Abram had hinted as much, It nagging thoughts continued in Jonas's head. Truth was, m two of them scarcely knew each other anymore. Is a futureW us even possible?

It was unjust as his shunning was, Jonas was suddenly very eager to get home and set things aright. For Leah's sake.

He scrutinized the piece of wood intended for the desk top

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and immediately spotted the small yet visible dip where he'd sanded much too hard. Straightening, he stopped his work. Outcast or not, it's time I correct the foolishness of the past . . . time I did what I should've done long ago.

"This desk will have to wait for finishing," he announced. Jake looked up, eyes blank. "What do ya mean?" "I'm closing up shop for a few days. I'll explain everything when I return."

Feels like a lifetime of waiting, he thought.

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The sun had already begun to make its way southward in Lancaster County. High in the sugar maple trees, birds chirped and twittered contentedly, and, Jonas imagined, perhaps a crow poked at an abandoned wasps' nest.

He was very aware of the many familiar landmarks as he sat in the backseat of the taxicab he'd taken from the train

> limn in downtown Lancaster. Staring out the window, he tried to tip his mind to do things the right way, with some semblance of propriety, at least. On the other hand, since he was

If he were a visitor, there was no harm done in simply putting off

his visit to Bishop Bontrager.

While it was Leah he longed to see, he felt he must head

west to Grasshopper Level to speak with his father before finalizing notions of a visit to Gobbler's Knob. So the cab was traveling through the village of Strasburg, southeast of Peach Lane with its tall trees and curving road dotted with Amish farms on either side, and then on to the Mast nit hard house. He gazed out at roads he and Leah had not jointly ridden on together in his open buggy, but had walked on

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numerous times, enjoying the sun, the earthy smell of fields, and their easygoing talk.

When he arrived at his father's house, Jonas hurried around to the back door, where he saw his mother in a green dress and old black apron standing by the cookstove, stirring, a big soup kettle with a long wooden spoon.

Turning to look his way and seeing him just then, she let out a gasp and put her hand to her throat. "Ach, is it you, Jonas?" she said, coming quickly to the door, her eyes shining, with happiness and tears both as she stared at his face and beard. "You've come home!"

But almost as fast as she'd expressed joy on her sweet face, the reality of his shunning must have set in, for her eyes darkened and she began to back away.

"Hullo, Mamma. Is Dat home?" His pulse throbbed with every breath, and he felt as though he were sleepwalking.

His mother struggled to hold back her tears, the thinly disguised longing evident on her dear face. "Your father's in the barn," she said softly.

"Believe me, I mean no trouble . . ." he managed to say, knowing full well he was required to speak to his father first, as was their custom when an excommunicated family member returned home.

Jonas hurried across the yard toward the large bank barn. The luster of orange and yellow trees captured his awareness yet again, but only for an instant. His stride was strong and he felt the determined set of his own jaw, his gaze steadfast on the open barn door.

He found Dat tending to the mules, talking low, slow words in Dutch, just as Jonas remembered his father doing when he was a boy. Standing there, he took in the old place

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... i I|n imi livable barn stench, recalling all the years he'd .1 ml alongside his father and younger brothers . . . the i niti they'll (Hilled on each other, the times when he was illnVYtd In wear Dat's work boots and he'd gone clunking and lulling tliMHigh the haymow, kicking up a dust to kingdom

I If vv;iiied to speak till Dat's back was no longer turned so I.. -. \imill not startle his aging father. "Dat, it's Jonas."

\n lull and brawny as ever, his father inched his head up, i .1 mi; uneven breaths, his large shoulders rising with each .,,. ed heave. "Son?"

"I've come a long way to speak to ya." He wanted to hurry in Mill's side, reach around the familiar burly frame and hug Hi- mini he'd missed so terribly.

M:ii extended his hand. "Come here to me, Jonas. Let me I...! ai ya."

1 obediently he moved across the barn floor; his mouth t\ . ni dry as the moment hit him hard. "I wish to talk to ya,M,i"

"You're a married man, jah?" His father chewed on a piece 'I .1 raw he held in his callused hand as he studied Jonas's

1 11 in. "Where's your missus?"

Jonas felt the softness of his beard. "Oh that. Well, things .in- a hit different out in Ohio. We let the whiskers grow right away, followin' baptism. I'm still unhitched."

Dat kept staring, as if what Jonas had just said and what Ma I was seeing with his own eyes didn't quite register. "Jake wioie us a letter. . . said he'd run into ya. . . but I never expected him goin' out to Ohio would bring you back to us."

How can I tell him otherwise? Jonas wondered, but he didn't hnvc to reveal his plans not just yet. "I'm home to talk over

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some things with Bishop Bontrager," he volunteered. "Infoci, I'm headed up to Gobbler's Knob after a while."

Dat seemed interested in hearing more, nodding his ho;ul quicklike. "Well, now, I sure hope you're goin' to talk abom repentin' and returning home . . . where ya belong, after ;ill these long years."

Jonas didn't have the heart to say differently when he took in the look of longing in his dear old father's eyes. "I have some questions to voice, for now." He didn't say what, but he added, "And I'm here to ask something of you, too."

"That's right fine, as long as you're goin' to repent." Then1 it was again. Dat knew he best not be talking for too lonjj with his wayward son unless the Gobbler's Knob bishop allowed it.

"I have to know something from you directly," said Jonas, "Why was my brother sent to Ohio . . . forced to leave behind his sweetheart-girl?"

Dat's eyes grew suddenly small and a deep frown tunneled into his brow. "Not your concern." j

"I beg your mercy on this, Dat. Jake's awful ferhoodkd . . , j he loves a girl here. He wants to marry her he told me so."

"Abram Ebersol's daughters are off limits to my sons. No i exceptions," Dat bellowed, hands clenched. Jonas heeded tinflinching muscles around Dat's mouth and whiskers, the Inv in his eyes as he uttered the terse explanation. "The family':, tainted. Leah's a bad seed, 'cause of her illegitimate birth. Bui I don't need to be tellin' you that. Look how she tricked yon."

Jonas was shocked that his father could refer to one mi lovely in spirit as deceitful, even wicked. "How can you s;iy that?"

"The woman betrayed you by gettin' you to join chuivli

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ftlli her over there in Gobbler's Knob, that's what." His idler inmlr an attempt to explain his view of the entire probjiiu Ihiit I call's deception Jonas's taking the baptismal vow R IhT church had set him up for eventual shunning, when liii- iliiinpcJ ya and went for that other fella."

"Uk! IVachey, ya mean?" Jonas asked, knowing from Login's K-iicr to him that Leah had never married Gid. ^n Is, in fact, still a maidel." ^Hhc news was evidently not a surprise to Dat. ^Hfou honestly blame Leah for all this?" Jonas asked. ^HMm-.iiu, the skunk, carries the full weight of blame," his ^H9 u-plk'd, making it mighty clear that had not Abram HBhI his liome, and Ida her arms, to "that witch of a sister, II < I Vrnneinan, back when she was in the family way with|i i husband, you would never have been put under the Lu Nt-vor!"

I I 'it's shout startled the mules, and a small cloud of dust !< mill ihe air as the animals' hooves stamped and dug into li i'ii hi ml. "That's enough talkin' for now. You best be ititlin' in see the minister!"

I W1111 i hat'Dat turned away as one did to the shunned, niuiijih doing so did not conceal the rapid rise and fall of Imhi'i's shoulders. I Will Iw turn his back on me . . .yet again? .

"Ach, she's as perty as a rosebud," Leah breathed, cradling Kuih's newborn daughter in her arms.

Mary Kuih nodded drowsily in the birthing bed, all smiles. "It- from our Lord to us," she said, dabbing at her perspired

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face and neck with a damp towel.

"What's her name?" Leah looked down at this precious, tiny person, holding her gently near.

"Ruthie," replied Mary Ruth, glancing up at Robert, who leaned his head against her own.

Leah kissed Ruthie's wee face and reluctantly passed her in to Aunt Lizzie, who was clearly itching to get her hands on the sleeping bundle. "Suits her fine, seems to me," Leah said,

"It surely does," said Lizzie, eyes alight.

Leah stepped out into the hallway, glad for such an easy birth for her sister. She was also grateful to Dan and Doll if Nolt, who had insisted Robert and Mary Ruth come to their home for the midwife-assisted birth, although the idea behind that was so Mary Ruth could be within "calling distance" of Dr. Schwartz should anything go wrong.

Whispering a prayer of thanksgiving, Leah donned her shawl and slipped out the back door, pleased to walk beneath the brilliant canopy of colors toward home.

Blazing autumn foliage caught Henry's attention as he rose from his desk and stared out his window. He noticed the young Amishwoman strolling along the road, swinging her arms and enjoying the afternoon sun. He was intrigued by her grace and the lilt of her gait back straight, head high, feet bare, even though temperatures had turned chilly in the night. Leah

was a beauty to behold, and he wished he had not disappointed such an upstanding person with his selfish stupidity.

The phone rang in his office, and he went to his desk lo

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i" I up I he receiver. "Dr. Schwartz speaking."

I Pml, you're a grandpa!"

I 'Well, what good news, Robert! How's your little missus?"

li mkril lirst about Mary Ruth.

I 'Oh, she's fine . . . happy as can be."

| 'And the baby?"

I 'A little girl six pounds, eight ounces, and only nine-

|> 'i Indies long. But she's real healthy and the prettiest baby

1 I 'VtT seen."

1 'No doubt it's true." He chuckled, recalling Robert's own

Rlilh mid i he rapturous feeling of seeing his firstborn child for

IP first lime. "Congratulations, son," he said. "And give

iHwiy Ruth our love."

I Robert urged him to come over right away. "Bring Mother

kkiliH to see little Ruthie . . . her given name. It's not a nick-

Hi," he insisted. "This is Mary Ruth's idea, and I like it!"

Hwjcnry could certainly hear the joyous cadence of Robert's

He, niul he assured him they would soon be over. "Thanks

^Hhc phone call," he said before hanging up.

^H*k' returned to the window, wondering if Leah was still in

HB, Sliiring in*o the near-neon oranges and golds of the

pl'iusive willow oak shade tree and silver maples, his

II" <ui;hls returned to the secret Abram's second daughter had

j I- Innrly chosen to keep from the world ... at least for now.

I dart' not press my good luck, he thought.

News of his first granddaughter mingled with his former t'Hlections on Jake, his first grandson. In a second of momentuiiN decision, he reached for a pen and wrote two words on liIh note pad: Early retirement.

I le determined his future right then a future that would hp his choice no matter what Leah decided to do. He would

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turn his clinic over to Ron Burkholder, the young intern ptv.s ently assisting him, and retreat from his faithful patients. I If would punish himself, since no one else had . . . effectively locking himself up by withdrawing from his greatest passion in life, however much longer it might endure. He would announce this to Lorraine tonight at supper, after they'd cooed over and held their new grandbaby.

"Ruthie," he whispered, already fond of the name Mury Ruth had selected.

Once more his thoughts returned to Jake . . . and to Deny, M31 son will never know either his own son or his niece. Henry was again humiliated that Derek bore the Schwartz name. (i) perhaps, on further recollection, Derek was merely a reflection of the worst part of himself. Henry shuddered.

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JiftHN was convinced he'd borrowed his father's slowest drivliiM horse, but he wasn't in the mood to gripe, even to himself,

11" niyh he was in a tremendous hurry. He had left his father " ill awful bad way, back there in the barn, Dat having been

1 -ill jklad and reluctant to see him. Regrettably there had

1 'ii no other way to handle that initial encounter, and the i i icmained that he had needed transportation to get to i ' I uip Bontrager's.

I he truth c^ame home to him that his father believed I 'i nm's daughters were at the very root of the problem beseti ii \r, I lie Masts. First Leah . . . and now Lydiann.

Poor Jake, he thought, wishing he could do something to i limitfc things for his brother. But knowing their father. . . mul hardheaded Abram, there was only one way to unravel Mirh a thorny matter.

I lurring the old mare, Jonas leaned forward in the Mast l.imily buggy, as if doing so might encourage the horse i inward, up the long, steep grade to Gobbler's Knob.

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Years ago Leah had memorized the tree that marked the halfway point between the Nolts' house and the Ebersol Col tage. She looked curiously at the bent old spruce, wondering what had happened to cause its deformity. Surely not lighl ning or hurricane-gale winds, although they'd had a few scares with such violent weather in past summers. Today the autumn air was as calm as the atmosphere encircling a newborn infant, and she felt as though she could still smell and for I Mary Ruth's new little one. "Ruthie Schwartz," she said, smil ing at the memory of Robert's face upon holding his daughtei for the first time.

I will enjoy everyone else's babies, she thought, though mil sadly, merely accepting her own lot. I'll love each one . . . spoil 'em, too!

Watching the birds flit from tree to tree, several groups of them playing chase across the road and back again, she got to thinking about the days, not so long past, when Lydiann and Abe were completely dependent on her loving care. The ye;ii\s had flown away and both children had reached adolescence, eager to stretch their youthful wings. Especially Lydiann . . . , dear, heartbroken girl.

She could only hope for the best where Lyddie was concerned . . . Abe, as well. She, Dat, and Aunt Lizzie had surely given their all to instill obedience to God and the church, along with a full measure of honesty, kindness, and a humble spirit. The children had heard more Scripture than she ever had growing up, and for this she was beholden to Dat. Leah was endlessly thankful he had embraced Mamma's and Lizzie's faith as his own. Really, it had changed his attitude toward a lot of things. ',... '.".,'

Feeling compelled to wander from the road a ways, she

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If mihd a large rock beyond the shoulder and sat there still as LimiIiI he, enjoying the birdsong that was certain to quiet with Kit'r|i iiiiHimn and, soon to come, the cold winter. She rememlfcii*I rd I lie surprise in Dat's eyes when she had shared about l||lc l.idybugs congregating on the side of the barn. "Jah, a Iflgilil linrsh winter this one'll be," he'd said, confirming her |.|U plcioMs.

I Pondering nature's splendor all around, she heard the lit Hind of a horse and buggy but did not turn her head to look. Illoupiis of carriages and horses came and went up and down [thin road sometimes she could almost tell which horse |'bvl"Hm'i'd to which family before ever actually laying eyes on ||l, Presently she concentrated on the rattle of the hard [wheels, the clip-d'clap and gait of the horse. Whoever it was |v,i.'.n'l from Gobbler's Knob.

When the horse was but several hundred feet away, she mined out of curiosity. Squinting, she saw the features of a I in in led man who seemed familiar somehow. She was drawn hy his appearance but knew better than to stare at a married Hum, lor pity's sake! Yet there was something more to him I lie way he (held the reins, the tilt of his head than simply his looks.

The closer the horse pulled the carriage toward her, the nil ire she stared. She ought to look away, but a sudden knowIn^ llooded her.

Jonas? But surely she must be mistaken. This man had a I mini Had Jake gotten his information off beam in his letters in Lydiann?

Her own indecision was resolved when the man glanced her way, a look of puzzlement on his face.

Suddenly he pulled on the reins and called out, "Whoa!"

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When the horse had obeyed and come to a halt, he leaped down and walked toward her. "Leah? Is that you?"

This was Jonas. There was no mistaking his voice, or those azure blue eyes.

Removing his hat, he said softly, "I didn't expect to sec yn out here on the road."

And 1 didn't expect to see you ever again, she thought in wonderment. It was her turn to nod, her turn to say sonic thing anything but she was unable to speak. Jonas was hen'I He stood only a few feet away, holding his hat, eyes shining,

"Nice day for a walk, ain't?" he said.

His casual tone took her off guard, and a thousand answers cluttered her mind, none of them making sense at all.

"Jah, a perty day, for sure," she murmured, still staring at his beard.

A long, awkward moment passed as Jonas held his hat in his hands, turning it repeatedly. Neither of them seemed to know what to say.

"I'm on my way to see the bishop," he said at last, gesturing toward the buggy. "Would ya care to ride a ways with me.1"

She was again mindful of his beard. "But. . . Jonas, you're married."

He chuckled a bit. "These whiskers don't mean what you think." And he explained the Ohio custom, apparently mighty eager to clear up that niggling detail.

She felt like laughing but squelched her giddiness. She wasn't a bit sure what she was doing . . . couldn't think clearly, not with those adoring eyes of his staring down at her that way.

"You must be mighty surprised to see me, Leah."

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"Well, I'll have to say I am. Uh, but I best not ride withyiii," (he said quickly.

He 11 owned for a moment and then smiled. "I'm here to I M up ii lew important things."

hnuis is a shunned man. . . .

'Arc y:i headin' to the bishop's to talk 'bout lifting the I mil on you, maybe?" she asked.

I It* paused, his eyes locked on hers. "He and I have plenty i II.Hcuss." His smile was the next thing to beautiful. "I came I I, rijjjht away when I heard.

... " He shook his head, as if .. 'iisidering his reply, nearly twirling his hat in his hands

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I liming, he looked at the horse and carriage. "I say you

141 ui I have some catchin' up to do."

She eyed the buggy, wishing she could agree to go along HlitI sir beside him in the first seat the way they used to in his m|in) courting buggy when they were teenagers. Lydiann's age, nln- ilmught.

Was she willing to risk getting in trouble with the brethifn, accepting a ride before the bishop had his say with Jonas?

"If the bishop or one of the ministers should happen along iiiul see me ridin' in your buggy, wouldn't I be considered disolu-ilient?"

He grinned. "All of that. . . and much more."

She couldn't suppress her smile. "I don't mean to be diffiinil "

"Then don't." Again, the smile that made her heart flutIcr. "Please, won't ya get in the carriage, Leah?"

She took a deep breath. I've waited forever for this moment.

"I want to talk to ya further," he said more softly. "I've missed you terribly."

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All reason flew away when his endearing eyes met hers, "Well, I s'pose it might be all right." She willingly follows I Jonas past the horse and to the carriage, where he helped hei up.

Once inside, Jonas picked up the reins, his voice suddenly earnest again, a concerned look in his eyes. "How's your fain ily?"

She shared that her father was well. "But Mamma dial giving birth to our Abe in 1949," she explained. "I raised my brother and sister Lydiann as my own, with help from Dat. . , and, more recently, Aunt Lizzie, who married my father some six years ago."

He expressed his sadness over the loss of her mother, ami Leah was taken by his gentleness. Their talk grew more ani mated as she attempted to catch him up on the community i >l the People in Gobbler's Knob.

The years were melting away, as though nothing much had changed. And when her father's house came into view, Jonas didn't halt the horse or offer to make the turn into tin* long lane to the Ebersol Cottage.

Instead, he kept on, describing his Apple Creek cabinet making shop and telling her about Emma Graber, the deal landlady who rented out an upstairs room to him. He talked of his years alone . . . and the many wonderful-good things tinLord had been teaching him.

Leah hung on to his every word, soaking in his presence, memorizing his every movement and expression . . . lest she wake up and discover this to be a fleeting dream.

When Jonas stopped talking of Ohio, an uncomfortable silence followed. And then, he turned to her, his eyes

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lilir i||flth*f serious. "Leah ... I believed all these years. . . you \< i' fflurrtcil u> Smithy Gid."

I illf shook her head slowly. "I sent a letter right back ltli> i ynu wrote me your questions." She paused, gathering her

Ic'iyylllN, Ikt wits.

I loniiN mrrned to look at her. "What letter do ya mean?" I In nil her life, she could not have imagined this conver-

n mid this moment, as the two of them came to grips

U\ nil nil the foolishness that had caused their wedding plans

> i'>i tivvry. She explained the mix-ups and misunderstandings Hi I't'Sf she could, careful to keep dear Sadie out of her li hi il'ks, "I've honestly forgiven the past," she whispered at

i i

I 'Uowly Jonas pulled back on the reins, bringing the buggy I i atop on the dirt road south of the Amish cemetery, off H " 'T^etown Road. "I didn't know for sure till just now," he Bui'I, "but I've waited years to tell you this, never daring to In lii-vi' I'd have the chance."

I ' ilu1 stared at his dear face. "What is it?" she asked, nearly I'l .iiMess to know.

I Mis eye* gently pierced her. "My heart has always Belonged to you, Leah."

I In that tender, yet revealing instant, she knew that no

flutter how busy her life had become, how important her

tuponsibilities to Lydiann and Abe, or how many times she

liiul been convinced she'd left the past far behind, she had

never, ever stopped loving Jonas.

"If you should happen to have any feelings left for me," lie said in a near whisper, "I'd like to spend time with you . . . (jet to know you again. Once the bishop gives me the goahead, that is." ; ; '

' / (/ d~. e us I.

She breathed in slowly and held the air in her lungs. W;i-. he indicating he'd returned home to court her. . . was rh;ii what he meant to say? "I ... it's ... I'd like to get iv acquainted, jah, really I would. It's just that. . ." Scarcely could she get the words out.

So many things to consider . . . to work through. Tinbishop's insensitive ruling on Sadie, for one. Wouldn't Jon;i-. be put through a similar Proving? One even more trying, pel haps? And there was Jonas's father to reckon with, too. Wouldn't Peter Mast and Bishop Bontrager put their head', together and devise a way to keep Jonas and Leah apart? Pos sibly forever.

"I love you," Jonas whispered, his words close to her ear.

Tears sprang to her eyes, yet she nodded back, desperately trying to tell him that she cared deeply, too.

"I'll never leave you again, Leah. Never."

She could not speak for the rush of emotion, and when Inmoved closer still, she felt nearly helpless, yielding, at last, lo his tender embrace.

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I Immu:,ily marvel at the amazing things the Lord has done

in inv li^' -I sometimes have to pinch myself, for sure. Jonas

i ill I. iws me . . . after all this time. But what is most astonish-

""-, iiMilt- from my darling's plan to move back home, is that

In with a little help from Dat was the one to set the

In i-I in motion for Jonas to return in the first place. Aunt

I ' H whispered this to me while we were rolling out pie

i h 'U|;li loday.

I Ik- minute*! could go and find Sadie in the Dawdi Haus, when- she was sitting and reading Mamma's Bible, I leaned tii nvii and kissed her cheek.

She looked up at me and said with eyes bright with her i iwn tears, "It was the least I could do for ya, sister, considerin' ,ill i he trouble I've caused."

I)ear Sadie! She misses Harvey something dreadful, and I pray she might offer up her desires and longings to the Lord, lin Me alone is the answer to her lonely and broken heart.

Lydiann, too, seems caught in a fog of melancholy. She is miserable and restless, and more times than I can count, I've

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prayed that something or someone might come along to ^ei her attention off Jake Mast.

It's still heartbreaking for me to think of Sadie's son beinu clear out in Ohio, though now with Jonas returning home, I also worry Jake might up and decide to come back, too. If so, what a pickle we will be in!

Dr. Schwartz surprised me by announcing his retiremeni, even though Lorraine says this won't happen for another six months or so he'll have to turn his loyal patients over in young doctor Burkholder. If I want to, I'll still have plenty I < > do keeping house for them, though sometimes it's hard in work for Dr. Schwartz, knowing what I know. It does seem peculiar to me that he should want to simply travel round and "see the world," giving up his work at the clinic when he's still a relatively young man. Dat thinks it's

an awful shame. "A man oughta work till he dies," my father likes to say. A:> for me, I think it is high time the village doctor packed away his stethoscope.

Thinking of work, Sadie, Lydiann, and I have been busy sewing dresses and aprons for Hannah's girls, as well as crocheting more baby blankets for sweet Ruthie. And it won't be long before Ruthie has herself a new cousin, for Hannah's to tell me privately that she's expecting another little one, as well.

Abe, the baby of this family, has been having plenty of fun at the expense of a good many rats and other farm pests here lately. With the corn harvest in full swing, he's been joining other young fellows round the area, going to pest hunts. So the suppertime talk is frequently filled with his chatter about such rambunctious things, but I do love to watch his expressive eyes light up with all the youthful excitement. And I can see by Dad's eyes that he, too, is delighted and amused.

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I am also outwardly pleased at the prospect of Jonas's (pending) return to Gobbler's Knob, although I must admit I'm a bit fretful in waiting to hear how the bishop and his brethren will view all of this . . . and just when I'll see my pinved if it is.

I fear now, I simply thank our dear Lord for His merciful illness, and I'm trusting Him no matter what the future may hold, I can only hope to marry Jonas one fine day, but even without a red end and a joyous beginning, too must rest in Phil's reign will, and that alone.

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